SUMMER 25¢

TRIPLE WESTERN

THREE NOVELS IN ONE MAGAZINE

He Wanted Another Man's Wife

BIG RED
by Burt Arthur

Friends Were Not For Him

FIGHT ALONE, DIE ALONE
by Philip Morgan

No Woman Had Ever Tamed Him

SHOWDOWN ON SQUAW CREEK
by Ray Gaulden

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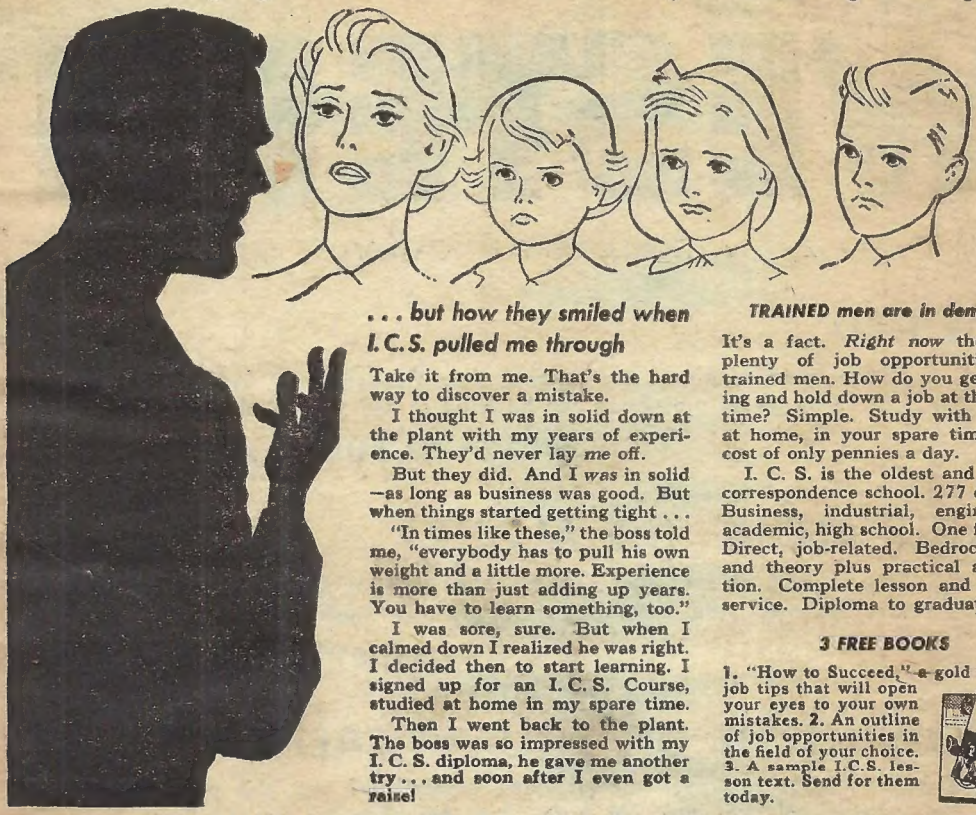

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THREE WESTERN ACTION NOVELS

TRIPLE WESTERN

VOL. 17, NO. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION SUMMER, 1956

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They came no better nor tougher than Canavan—yet how long could he go on protecting the husband of the woman he loved?

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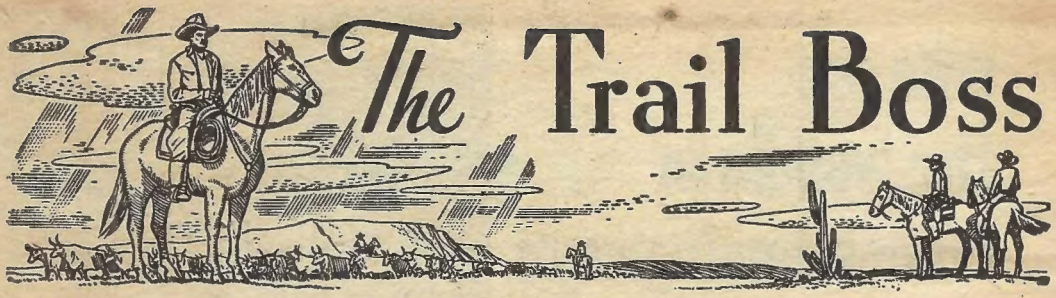

THE FIRST REPEATING RIFLE

By Eugene Foster

THE FACT that repeating rifles played a major role in the winning of the west is nothing new. Bullards, Burgesses, Colts, Marlins and Winchesters have been banging away from Mexico to the Canadian border for years. As far back as 1860, men were reading posters listing the capabilities of Henry's Patent repeating rifle.

All of these rifles were lever-action models, and they are famous. But nowhere in the literature on firearms is there a reference to the Wrist-action Harding Special. This is a strange how-do-you-do, because the Harding Special may well lay claim to the honor of being the first repeating rifle. The gun was an invention of Stephen Harding's way back in the early 1700's. It was regarded by the Indians of the region with much respect and wariness.

England was still in possession of the colonies when Stephen Harding built his inn and blacksmith shop near the Kennebunk River in Maine, in 1702. The Colonial Government was engaged in exploring and surveying the hinterland back from the Atlantic coast. Harding acted as guide for many of the expeditions. As a result of his trips he became friendly with most of the Indians.

In all his dealings with the Indians, Harding observed only the strictest honesty. This practice soon established for him a solid reputation with the natives. His word was accepted in trading matters without reservation. The inn and blacksmith shop prospered. Hardly a day passed that a solemn circle of red men was not to be found in front of the shop.

Aside from his skills as innkeeper, blacksmith and guide, Harding was also adept at spinning an occasional yarn. He was known by the Indians to be the soul of integrity in all other matters. It was inevitable that the yarns should be taken at the same value. And so they were.

One afternoon, while waiting for the forge to heat up, he hunkered down beside the silent red men and began cleaning his rifle. He passed an oiled rag carefully over the barrel of the Wrist-action Special and casually mentioned that he loaded this gun differently from others. And this was the gun he used whenever he hunted animals—or Indians. Around the circle a number of black eyebrows lifted with interest.

First, he said, he put a regular charge of powder, shot and wadding into the muzzle-loader. On top of this charge he put another one. He did this until the barrel was filled to within a couple of inches of the top. When the time came, he told the highly attentive red men, he could fire at widely separated targets by making a secret motion with his wrist. His gun would then speak with the mouths of many guns.

A ripple of hearty grunts passed around the circle. Here was powerful medicine indeed. This trader surely must be a favored child of Manitou.

War finally broke out with the Indians, and Harding's repeating rifle stood him in good stead. Although battles raged furiously throughout the countryside, the patrons of the inn were in no way inconvenienced. The property of Stephen Harding was given a wide berth. None of the red men harbored a desire to talk with the gun of many mouths.

It is unfortunate that Harding never did tell anyone wherein lay the secret of his rifle. History had to wait until such men as Henry, Spencer and Winchester came along and put the idea across so well that a man felt undressed without a lever-action at his side.

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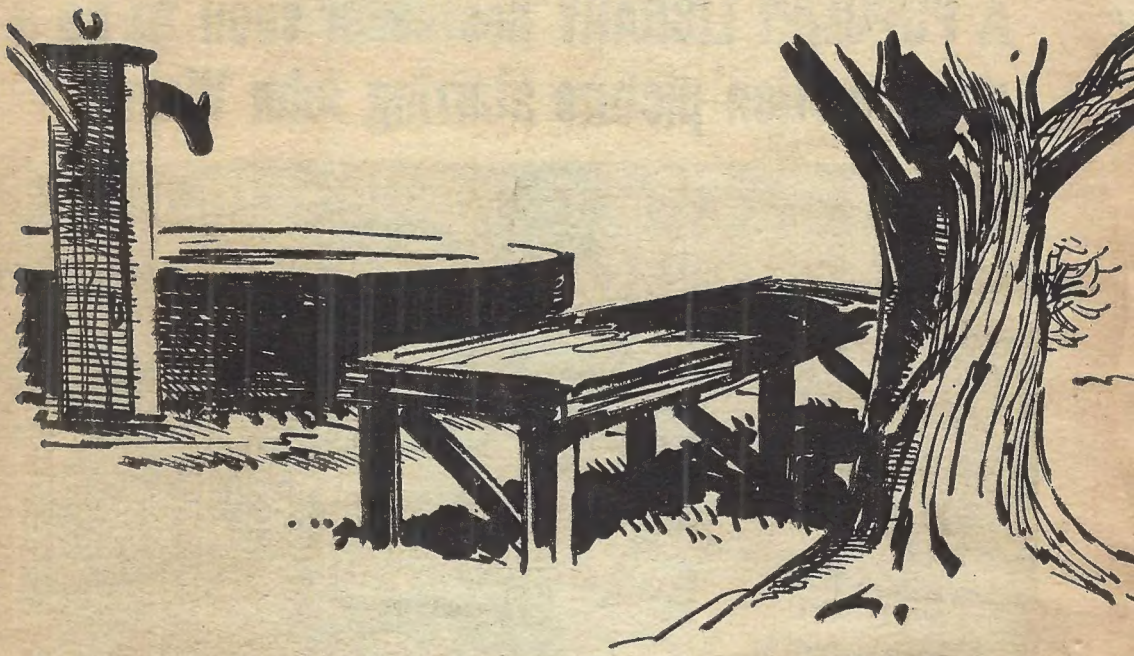
BIG RED

A Novel by **BURT ARTHUR**



They came no better nor tougher than Canavan—yet how long could he go on protecting the husband of the woman he loved?

I

THE pin-scratched initials in the heel plate of his low-slung, tied-down gun were "JC." They stood for Johnny Canavan. There were six feet, four inches and two hundred pounds of him. When he thumbed his dust-streaked hat up from his forehead and let it ride on the back of his head, red hair was revealed crowning his sun-bronzed, bitter-eyed face. Tuck Wells, the balding, celluloid-collared, string-tied and sleeve-gartered bartender, glanced at him again and finally asked the question he had wanted to ask the moment Canavan had entered the place.

"Mister, haven't I seen you before?"

Hunched over the curved lip of the glistening bar with

Even as he swung down Red Canavan kept his gaze on Deglin's hands

his shoulders round and his right boot heel hooked over the scuffed foot rail, and his big hands wrapped around a half-drained, foam-ringed beer glass, Canavan lifted his eyes.

"I mean, you've been in here before, haven't you?" asked Tuck.

"Yeah. Long time ago though."

Wells smiled and said, "Thought so. I never forget a face. Wish I was that good remembering the names that go with the faces." He squeezed out his bar rag and swished it over the bar. "Cuero look any different to you since the last time?"

"Haven't had a chance to look around, so I can't tell yet."

"Then I can tell you. Nothing's changed around here. Leastways, not in the ten years I've been here."

Cuero, Canavan repeated to himself. So that was where he was. Riding into town, he remembered thinking there was something vaguely familiar about the place. But he couldn't recall the name of the town, and there were no sign posts to tell him. It was only when the bartender mentioned it that old memories associated with Cuero began to return to Johnny Canavan.

He recalled how a band of wanted men who had taken refuge in Mexico had ventured across the Border in a brief show of defiance, and had taken over Cuero. The sheriff had appealed to the Rangers for help, and Cap McDermott had sent Canavan to drive out the intruders. The name of the Cuero sheriff too, came surging back. It had been Embree. But would he be sheriff here now, after all these years?

A FORCED, all-night ride had brought Johnny Canavan to Cuero at dawn that long-ago time. Informed of the Ranger's coming, Embree and his deputy had been waiting just outside of town. They had routed the lawless out of bed in the town's only hotel, which the outlaws had taken over for themselves, and had driven them to the street.

In the gunfight that followed, Canavan grimly recalled now, he had disposed of two of the intruders, and wounded a third one. That renegade, with the other surviving members of the band somehow had managed to get to their horses, and had escaped in the same direction from which they had come. Reporting to McDermott by telegraph that he had completed the Cuero assignment, Canavan had asked for orders. McDermott had answered without delay. Canavan was to go on a three-weeks' leave. When the leave was over, he was to report at Ranger headquarters in Austin.

Beth, his pretty bride of some thirteen months, had gone to visit her cousins, Ben and Millie Jessup, who lived in Clovis, the next nearest town to Cuero. Canavan had headed for Clovis. It would be a happy surprise for Beth. She wouldn't be expecting to see him so soon, and now she wouldn't have to make the return trip home by herself.

But when Canavan had arrived at the Jessup place, a frightening scene had confronted him. The house had been burned to the ground! What made it worse was that there was no one around to tell him what had happened, or to reassure him. He had raced back to Clovis and burst into the town's law office.

"Didn't know where to get hold of you, Canavan," the red-face sheriff had told him lamely. "Or I'd of got word to you."

"Why didn't you get in touch with Ranger headquarters?" Canavan had flung back at him. "They'd have known how to reach me."

" 'Fraid in all the excitement, I didn't think of that."

"What happened?" Canavan remembered demanding impatiently.

"Well, let's see now. It all started when some nesters moved into the valley. Millen, of the Bar Z, had a run-in with them and he talked the other cattlemen into going after them and chasing them out. Jessup was the only rancher around who wouldn't take a hand in it. Millen went out to see him and they had some words, then they started throwing punches at each other. Jessup gave Millen a good walloping, and Millen told Jessup he'd fix him good and went off. Late that same night—"

"Hold it a minute," Canavan commanded. "How d'you know all this?"

"Got it from somebody who was there," the sheriff answered. "That Briggs feller

that Jessup had working for him."

"Go on."

"Jessup didn't have any bunkhouse, so Briggs bedded down in the barn, in the hay loft. He woke up when he thought he smelled something burning, poked his head out the loft window and saw the house burning. A man was standing in front of it. When your wife and the Jessups came stumbling out, he shot them down."

"Briggs recognize the man?"

"He says it was Millen. Now if we could only find Briggs—"

"Y'mean he's gone?"

"Yeah. Got some wild idea in his head that Millen might kill him to close his mouth. So he lit out before I could stop him, and nobody's seen him since."

"Swell," Canavan had commented bitterly. "What about Millen? You took him in, didn't you?"

"I was going to, Canavan. But with no witnesses to back up the charge against him—"

"I see . . . Millen still around?"

"Yeah, sure. So are the others. To my mind, they've all got blood on their hands. But how am I going to go about getting them convicted?"

"Who are they?"

"Trauble, Skowran, Quinn, Lang . . . Lemme see now. Oh, yes—Jake Horton."

Trauble, Horton, Lang and Skowran died in the doorways of their homes, shot to death when they came in answer to Canavan's repeated banging on the doors.

QUINN wasn't at home. Canavan waited for him to return, hiding in the shadows behind the house. It was almost midnight when the rancher appeared.

Canavan permitted him to unlock and open his door before he said curtly:

"All right, Quinn. Hold it."

Quinn stiffened.

"Turn around."

Slowly the cattleman obeyed, when he squared around, his gun was in his hand. His bullet went wild.

Canavan's gun roared an angry reply. Bullet-riddled, Quinn was flung backward into his home.

Because Millen had done the actual killing, Canavan left him for the last. Upon Millen's head, all the burning rage and the swelling clamor for vengeance would be heaped. Millen's house had been shadowy and silent when Canavan had ridden up to it. The door had been unlocked. A search of the house, then of the barn had disclosed signs of a hasty, almost frenzied flight. Deciding that his quarry had fled into the nearby hills, Canavan had set out after him.

It had taken him two full days to come up with Millen who had holed up in a pile of rocks and boulders. Circling around and coming down upon him from the rear, Canavan had overpowered him, dragged him out, and herded him up a winding trail that came to an abrupt end at the edge of a rocky ledge.

When the panting, wheezing Millen had seen the valley far below the ledge, he'd whirled around and lunged at Canavan wildly, clawing and kicking. Canavan had lifted him bodily and, with a mighty heave hurled him out over the ledge. Millen's scream had trailed him as he'd hurtled down to his death.

Canavan had returned to Clovis for a look at the graves of Millen's three victims in the churchyard. Then he'd headed for Andersonville, the county seat, where he'd tried to surrender himself to Arch Trumbull, the County Attorney, who had known him for years. Trumbull had refused absolutely to accept his surrender and had insisted, instead, that Canavan stay at the Trumbull home while the official himself sought advice from the state capitol on what to do about Canavan. At the end of the third day, Trumbull brought doughty old Cap McDermott back to the house with him.

"You're free to go," Trumbull had told him. "The State's Attorney agrees with me that no jury in the world would ever bring in a verdict against you. So—" He'd turned away.

McDermott, white-haired and as stiffly erect as a West Pointer, stepped forward and handed Canavan a folded paper. It had been his discharge from the Rangers.

Deep in retrospection, Canavan had forgotten where he was now until a voice said:

"How about it, pardner? It was the bartender. "Your beer must be flatter'n all get-

out. How about me puttin' a head on it and kind of freshening it up for you?"

Canavan looked down into his glass.

"No," he said. "This'll do fine." He drained his glass, slapped a silver piece on the bar, and sauntered out.

In the evening of the same day the saloon was crowded. At the far end of the bar, Canavan stood alone, toying with an empty whisky glass. He did not look up when another man came striding into the saloon. Only when a hush fell over the bar the silence made him raise his eyes.

The man walked down the length of the bar and tapped a man who stood there on the shoulder. That second man turned around.

"Yeah?" he asked. "Oh, it's you, Fisher!"

Others turned around then, too.

"I'm giving you fair warning, Sturges," the man who had been called Fisher said evenly. He was younger than Sturges, a man of about average height and build. He wore no holster; his gun was poked down inside the waistband of his pants. "You drive your cattle over my place again and there'll be trouble!"

STURGES, a swarthy, dark complected and thin-faced man, glanced at the men nearest him. A couple of them laughed.

"You heard him, Sturges," Canavan heard one man say. "You behave yourself, or instead of us chasing the nesters away from here, they'll run us off."

"Yeah," Sturges said. "How d'you like that for gall? A down-and-out nester with a hole in his britches!"

A burly man with burning black eyes and a week's growth of beard on his full, heavy face, and who hadn't turned around, said curtly over his thick shoulder:

"Spit in his eye, Sturges."

"I'm coming to it, Coley," Sturges assured. "I don't like it when anybody starts threatening me. You'd better get out of here, Fisher. While the getting's still good."

The homesteader did not move. The burly man whom Sturges had called Coley, turned around then. A scowl had already begun to spread over his face.

"He told you to get out, didn't he?" he demanded in a thickening, phlegmy voice. "So get out, y'hear?"

Some of the color began to drain out of Fisher's face. Instinctively his right hand came up from his side, but stopped when it reached his waist with his gun butt a hand's span away.

"Get out!" Coley roared and took a threatening step toward Fisher.

Suddenly he leaped at Fisher, struck him savagely in the face. The homesteader rocked under the impact of the stunning blow. The big man swarmed over him and slugged him viciously, sinking wrist-deep punches into his body and hammering him with mighty, roundhouse rights to the head. Fisher reeled, tottered backward, slumped against the side wall and slid to the floor on his knees with his back bent and his head bowed and sinking. When Coley stood over him and drew back his foot to kick him, a heavy hand caught him by the arm, swung him around and flung him away. Careening wildly, and unable to stop himself, Coley collided heavily with the bar.

His right hand clawed for his gun. He jerked it clumsily out of holster. As the muzzle cleared the thick lip, there was a deafening roar of gunfire. The echo caromed off the ceiling and walls and spent itself in ricochet flight. Coley cried out, dropped his gun, and clutched his right wrist with his left hand. Blood spurted through his fingers, ran over both hands, and dripped on his pants leg. Canavan, holding his gun on the big man, and half-crouching, took his eyes off him for an instant, to glance at the men flanking Coley. No one moved. Slowly Canavan began to back off, swinging his gun in an arc that took in every man facing him.

"Well?" he demanded. "Anybody else want to take a hand? How about you, Sturges? Going to back your pardner's play, or haven't you got the guts?"

Sturges crimsoned, but he did not answer Canavan's taunt. He took careful pains, while Canavan watched, to bring his right hand away from his gun and hold it against his chest. There were heavy footsteps on the veranda; and two men, one a little bulkier than the other and a step behind him, and both wearing silver stars pinned to their

vests, rushed into the saloon. Canavan recognized the man in the lead. It was Embree, the sheriff he had first run across years ago still here, and still lawman. The man behind him probably was Embree's deputy, although Canavan didn't recognize him.

The sheriff stopped abruptly when he saw Canavan with the levelled gun in his hand. His companion, in full panting stride, didn't stop. He piled into the sheriff, trampling him. Embree pushed him off angrily.

"Damn it, Giffy!" he sputtered, half turning. "Why in hell don't you watch where you're going?" His head jerked around. "Wh-what's going on here?"

There was no answer. He looked with frowning eyes at Coley whose hands were dripping blood, shifted his critical gaze across the saloon to Fisher who was sitting on the floor, his back against the wall. There was a blood-smear on the homesteader's mouth and blood bubbled in his nostrils. On his cheek-bone was an angry-looking scrape from which blood was trickling. Canavan shoved his gun into holster, and helped Fisher to his feet.

"You all right, pardner?"

Fisher nodded.

"Then let's go."

THE homesteader wiped the blood off his lips with his shirt sleeve. He trudged doorward and Canavan followed him. The two lawmen moved aside to let them pass. Embree and Canavan looked squarely at each other, but no sign of recognition passed between them. Fisher led the way down the veranda steps to the wooden walk.

"Where's your horse?" Canavan asked.

"Up the street."

Together they marched up the darkened street.

"How long have you been out here?" Canavan asked, after a brief silence.

"Oh, about six months."

"And before that?"

"Illinois."

"Farmer?"

"Yes. Taught school in between times, too."

"Uh-huh. The next time you take it into your head to go after anybody, even if it's only to warn 'em like you did Sturges tonight, don't do it where's he's bound to have friends with him. . . . You married?"

"Yes."

"Family?"

"Boy of nine."

"Then you've got a lot to stay healthy and alive for. But now you'll have to keep your eyes open for that Coley as well as for Sturges. Egged on by Coley, Sturgess will probably go out of his way to annoy you. And Coley will be after you on his own, to take out of you what I did to him."

When they came abreast of a hitch-rail in front of a darkened store where a lone, ground-pawing horse was tied at the rail, and Fisher stopped.

Canavan said, "Little too early for me to be turning in. If you want to wait a minute, I'll get my horse and ride out to your place with you."

"Fine," Fisher agreed.

A chilling wind had begun to blow by the time they reached the Fisher place. The homesteader, apparently finding it difficult to express his thanks to Canavan for having interceded in his behalf, tried to show his appreciation in another way. He prevailed upon Canavan to stay over for the night. But because the house was small and its accommodations limited, Canavan, while accepting the invitation, insisted upon bedding down in the hay loft.

Hours later—nearly midnight—the house, actually a cabin with a wing added to it, lay in deep darkness. The barn, too, was shrouded in shadows. Canavan, blankets wrapped, sat at the open hay loft window, staring out into the night. Twice he had laid down, rolled up in his blanket, but sleep had refused to come to him. He finally arose with a heavy sigh, groped his way to the window which he forced open and poked his head out. The wind droned with almost a human voice. He up-ended a box that was standing close by, perched himself on it and, resting his folded arms on the window sill, hunched over it.

Sound arose from the lower floor. Aggie,

Canavans mare, and Fisher's horse were occupying adjoining stalls. Aggie was the noisy one, making whatever sounds came from the barn. She stamped on the floor boards each time the wind flung dust against the closed doors. Sometimes her whinny sounded as though she were taunting the wind and the dust for their inability to penetrate the barn.

Time passed, and the darkness seemed to deepen. Canavan's head began to nod. He sighed, wearily started to get up—and stopped abruptly as he thought he saw a man standing in front of the barn. Canavan blinked, and peered down again. It *was* a man, and a half-raised rifle was in his hands. Then Canavan saw two other men appear, and the first man he had spotted ran to meet them. After a brief, hushed conference, they separated, with the rifleman heading for the front door of the silent house and the other two slanting away toward the sides of the building. Canavan whipped off the blanket, slung it aside and ran down the ladder to the lower floor. Aggie snorted and began to back out of her stall. Canavan collided with her, cursed and whacked her. She cried out indignantly, but hastily got out of his way. As he unhooked the double doors and bolted out there was a sudden burst of gunfire. A woman screamed, and a window pane shattered with a crash. Jerking out his gun, Canavan ran toward the house.

II

THE man who had posted himself at the front door to prevent the Fishers from breaking out before the fire could take hold, half-turned his head for a quick and probably a wondering look when he heard Canavan coming toward him. He raised his rifle, but before he could fire, Canavan flung a shot at him and he staggered and toppled. Glimpsing another man on the near side of the house, Canavan swerved toward him. The man fired. A whining bullet ripped Canavan's hat off his head. He fired twice, and cursed when he missed. The man began to retreat, yelling something, apparently a warning, to someone Canavan couldn't see, and disappeared around the back of the house. But instead of pursuing him, Canavan cut sharply past the front of the house, hurdling the body that lay in his path, and ran full tilt into two men who were rounding the house from the rear. He clubbed one with his gun and felled him, swarmed over the other and drove him back against the side wall and held him there, his gun digging into the fellow's body. He reached for his captive's gun, wrested it out of his hand, and slung it away. Then quickly stepping back, he held his own gun on the captive who was struggling to get up. Canavan slammed him back against the wall.

"Stay where you are!" he commanded. Cupping his free hand around his mouth, he yelled, "All right, Fisher! You can come out now."

He heard a bolt scrape, heard the front door open, then boot steps. Yellowish lantern light shone eerily over the ground. A man appeared, holding a lantern in front of him. A woman clutching a half-raised rifle followed him.

"Over here, Fisher!" Canavan called. "Take a look at these two mavericks."

The homesteader said something over his shoulder, and the woman stopped. He trudged on, heavy-legged and wearily.

"Know them?" Canavan asked.

Fisher peered hard at them, and shook his head.

"Ever see them before?"

"No, I don't think so."

"All right, you two," Canavan said curtly. "Who put you up to this?"

There was no answer.

"Who d'you work for?"

One of the men cleared his throat, but that was all.

"Get some rope," Canavan ordered Fisher, "so we can tie them up."

The homesteader trudged off. He returned shortly with a couple of pieces of rope dangling from his hand.

"Face the wall," Canavan ordered the raiders.

The two men obeyed. Fisher passed the rope to Canavan, and said:

"That body in front of the house. Do we have to leave it there?"

Canavan bunched the rope together in the hollow of his left arm and, drawing his gun,

The point of the massed riders fell in a tangle of kicking, screaming horseflesh

said, "Turn around, you men."

He herded them ahead of him around the house to where the dead man lay.

"Take him down to the barn," he ordered them.

With one man holding the dead man under his limply hanging arms, and the other man taking him by the feet, they carried him away and put him down in front of the barn. Aggie, standing in the open doorway, poked her head out at them. Fisher, holding the lantern aloft with one hand and carrying the rifle in the other, came trudging down, too. Canavan ordered the prisoners to put their hands behind them, and lashed each man's wrists together. When they started into the barn at Canavan's command, Aggie backed to permit them to enter. Each man's ankles were tied together, and each sank down on the floor. Canavan walked out.

"In the morning we'll take them into town," he told Fisher, "and turn them over to the sheriff. Meanwhile you might as well trot back to the house and go back to sleep."

"What about you?"

"That's what I aim to do, too. I'll leave it to that mare of mine to see that our friends inside don't get ideas. She'll kick their brains out if they try anything."

Curled up again in his blanket, Canavan

had no trouble dozing off.

HE AWOKE with a start, though, when he heard Aggie whinnying and pawing the barn floor. He sat up instantly, reaching for his gun and half drawing it out of holster. Mechanically, as he sat there listening, his eyes strayed to the window. It was dawn. Light was beginning to flood the sky. When he heard nothing more from below, he holstered his gun, slumped down again and lay flat on his back. But he was wide awake now, and after a few minutes he pushed off the blanket and sat up again. He smoothed his hair back with his hands and climbed to his feet.

When he went down the ladder to the lower floor he saw that the prisoners were where he had left them, sitting on the floor with their backs against the wall. The mare was standing squarely in front of the closed doors, blocking them. When Canavan came toward her, she whinnied; when he patted her, she nuzzled his arm and shoulder. She backed away a little reluctantly when he motioned her off. He went outside and headed for the house. The harsh dawn light was anything but flattering to the Fisher home; it looked uninvitingly drab and makeshift. But his gaze did not hold on it for long. He was looking for his hat. He found it shortly, lying flat and limp and a little dew damp in the thin crab grass and dirt that fronted the house. He picked it up, and frowned when he saw a black-rimmed bullet-hole in the crown, poked his finger through it and muttered something under his breath.

He was idling in front of the barn, watching the sky brighten, when he heard hoofbeats off in the distance. They came steadily closer and the drunning beat swelled. Two horsemen came into view. Spotting him, and apparently recognizing him, they came on at a quickened pace.

One of the riders was the sheriff; the other was Embree's deputy. For an instant Canavan's thoughts went back to the dawn routing of Cuero's unwelcome visitors. Embree and his deputy at that time, a man whose name still eluded Canavan, had been more of a hindrance than a help. They had got in each other's way, and twice, when they'd got in his way, too, he'd had to hold his fire and give his target a chance to scurry for cover. The sheriff's failure to cover the back yard and the alleys that flanked the hotel had given the renegades their avenue of escape.

The two lawmen clattered up to the barn and sat slack in their saddles.

"Kind of figured I'd find you out here, Canavan," the sheriff began. "Looked for you last night after that business with Coley Nye, and when I couldn't find you anywheres around town, I figured you'd come out here with Fisher. Got a favor to ask of you, Canavan."

"Oh?"

" 'Cept for last night, we haven't had any trouble around here between the cattlemen and the nesters. The flare-up between Nye and Fisher, I think I could've smoothed out. Now I don't know. Long as you're around, Nye'll be looking to get square with you, he's liable to get good and sore at Fisher, and take it out on him. Now if you'd get up on your horse and go on your way so I could tell Coley you've gone—"

"Sorry to disappoint you, Sheriff," Canavan said evenly, interrupting him. "But I think I'll stay around for awhile. As for your friend Nye, it's too late for you to tell him anything. He's showed his hand already. Want to have a look at what came of it?"

Canavan didn't wait for the sheriff's answer. He trudged around the barn, and Embree, frowning, climbed down from his horse and followed. But rounding the barn after Canavan, he stopped in his tracks and stared hard. In the grass against the side wall lay a canvas-covered body with booted feet sticking out. Embree gulped and swallowed.

"Who—who's that under there?" he asked and made a wry face.

"Thought you might be able to tell me," Canavan said. "He and two others tried to raid this place last night. He had the bad luck to get hit. The other two were luckier."

EMBREE lifted a corner of the canvas and peered under it. Suddenly he let it drop, and straightened up.

"Know him, Sheriff?" Canavan asked.

" 'Course I know him!" Embree snapped. He began to redden. "Dammit, Canavan, maybe you don't know what you've done, and maybe you don't care, but you've sure started something."

"That so?" Canavan drawled.

"Now there'll be hell to pay, and don't you think there won't! That young feller under that piece of canvas happens to be Lonny Nye, Coley's kid brother, and when Coley hears about this, he'll be fit to be tied. He'll go after you with everything he's got, and take it from me, Canavan, he's got a-plenty. You take my advice and climb up on your horse and put distance between you and Cuero." Embree stalked back to his horse. "Come on, Giffy," he said grumpily. "Let's get away from here."

"Aren't you forgetting something, Sheriff?"

The scowling, fuming sheriff looked around at Canavan.

"The dead man," Canavan reminded him.

"You killed him, didn't you? Then you figure out what you oughta do about him."

"All right," Canavan responded. "If that's the way you want it. But if you don't take him with you, you don't get the two who were with him."

Embree thought that over.

"Where are they?" he asked.

"Tied up in the barn."

The sheriff looked at his deputy.

"Giffy," he said, "Lonny Nye's laying around the side of the barn. You oughta be able to handle him by yourself. Boost him up on your horse while I go see about the others."

The deputy didn't look particularly enthused about the job, but he climbed down, and trudged away. Canavan followed Embree into the barn. He stood off to a side and watched the sheriff untie the two prisoners and help them to their feet. When Embree led them outside, Canavan sauntered out, too. The dead man, head, feet and arms dangling, lay slung across the back of Giffy's horse. The deputy sat in the saddle, one hand on the dead body in front of him and the reins in the other hand.

Embree mounted. "You go on ahead, Giffy," he said. "I'll catch up with you."

Giffy grunted; when he rode away, the two Nye hands trudged after him. Embree said to Canavan:

"Didn't want to say anything about this in front of Giffy. What he doesn't know won't hurt him. But I know about that business up at Clovis, what happened to you and the Rangers, and what you've been doing with yourself since then."

Canavan made no response.

"This drifting around from place to place," Embree continued, "and never staying put anywhere and taking root isn't good for anybody 'cept maybe an out-and-out saddle tramp. Now why don't you do yourself a favor, Canavan, and go somewhere, some place new, where nobody knows you or anything about you, and make a fresh start for yourself?"

He loped away after Giffy and the two men who were trudging along with him, overtook them and slowed his mount to a walk when he pulled alongside. Canavan saw them stop when they came to a clump of tall brush. Nye's men disappeared behind the brush only to reappear in another minute, mounted and leading a third horse. The four men rode away.

It was some fifteen minutes later when Fisher came down to the barn

"Morning," he said.

"Morning," Canavan responded.

Fisher's face was battered out of shape. His lips were bruised and puffy, and there was a blue and yellowish swelling under his left eye. The scrape on his cheek-bone below the eye looked raw and tender

CANAVAN told him, "The sheriff was here. He took the dead man away with him, with the two we caught."

"Was he able to identify the dead man?"

"Yeah. Lonny Nye. Our friend Coley's kid brother."

"Oh," Fisher said, and looked concerned. "That means trouble, doesn't it? When Nye finds out that his brother was killed here—"

"I don't think he'll be after you for that."

"Then he'll be after you."

"That's all right. Let him. I can take

care of myself."

"It isn't fair. What you did was in our behalf, and for you to get into trouble over it—"

"Forget it."

"Breakfast is ready."

"Thanks, but I think I'll wait and have mine when I get to town."

"My wife's expecting you to eat with us. She's set a place for you."

The door opened again and both men looked houseward. A slim, aproned young woman stood in the doorway.

"Breakfast!" she called. "Come and get it while it's still hot."

"Well, long as she's expecting me—"

The two men marched up to the house. The shattered window frame gaped emptily. Molly Fisher, brown-haired and comely, waited in the doorway, holding the door for them. She smiled at Canavan and said:

"We're happy to have you eat with us."

"Thank you," he told her.

She backed inside, holding the door wider. Canvan took off his hat as he entered the house. Fisher came in behind him, took Canavan's hat and hung it next to his own on the back of the door. A table with a bright red checkered cloth stood in the middle of the room. Three chairs, straight-backed and stiff looking, were pushed in close to the table. Past the window and standing flush with the far wall was a white iron bedstead with a quilt drawn up over it. Canavan's eyes probed the bare wooden floor below the level of the window for signs of broken glass, but there were none. The doorway that separated the room from the wing was a step or two past the bed, and curtain-covered. Since there was no sign of the homesteader's son, Canavan took it for granted that the boy was quartered in the wing, and that he was still asleep.

Mrs. Fisher brought a fire-blackened coffee pot to the table and a heaped up platter of biscuits. She followed them with two more platters, one holding criss-crossed strips of bacon, the other piled high with flapjacks from which tiny wisps of steam were still rising and curling. When Fisher placed a pitcher of syrup next to the flapjacks and pulled out a chair and said, "Sit down," Canavan nodded and seated himself. Fisher took the chair opposite, and Mrs. Fisher sat between them. When she said, "All right, Reuben," and bowed her head, Canavan bowed his head, too. He caught brief snatches, sometimes only a word or two here and there of Fisher's murmured prayer. When he heard the Fishers' chairs creak, he raised his head. Mrs. Fisher served him some bacon and her husband shifted a stack of flapjacks from the platter to Canavan's plate.

"We're indebted to you, Mr. Canavan," Mrs. Fisher said as he began to eat. He lifted his eyes to her. "I don't know what we'd have done last night if it hadn't been for you. We probably wouldn't be alive now. Then, too, Reuben's told me about the fight in the saloon, and what you did for him there. So we're doubly grateful to you."

"The coffee smells mighty good," Canavan answered, "and I'll go out of my way any time for good coffee. If yours tastes as good as it smells, we'll be even."

She smiled, poured the coffee, and watched while he sipped his.

"Ah," he said. "Tastes even better than it smells."

Just as they finished eating, the curtain over the connecting doorway was whisked aside, and a touseled, tow-headed little boy plodded bare-footed across the room to his mother's side. She put her arms around him and held him close, smoothed back his rumpled hair and said to him:

"This is Mr. Canavan, Johnny."

THE boy looked at Canavan and said, "H'llo."

"Good morning," Canavan answered. "And I'll tell you a secret. My name is Johnny, too."

The boy's eyes ranged over Canavan.

"He's awfully big, Ma, isn't he?"

"Yes, Mr. Canavan's a big man," she agreed. "And you can be just as big if you'd eat everything, as I'm sure Mr. Canavan does."

"I've got a lot of work to do this morning," Fisher announced. He pushed back from the table and got up. He looked at Canavan. "We'll see you again, won't we?"

"If I'm still around."

Fisher nodded. He drew his gun from inside the waistband of his pants and held it out to his wife. She took it without comment and put it in her lap. He crossed the room to the bed, reached under it and brought out a rifle. He came back to the table with the rifle slung under his arm. Molly Fisher lifted her eyes to him, and said:

"Be careful, Reuben."

"Oh, I'll be careful, all right," he assured her. "Keep an eye out yourself."

He patted his son on the head and walked to the door, took his hat off the nail and went out. As it closed behind him, the boy said disappointedly:

"He was gonna take me with him today."

"He'll take you another time, Johnny," Mrs. Fisher told him. She cupped his round little face in her hand, and kissed him lightly on the tip of his nose, and said, "Get dressed, Johnny, and have your breakfast."

He padded away, disappeared behind the curtain.

"I'm so glad he sleeps so soundly," she said with a trace of a smile parting her lips. "He didn't hear anything last night."

Canavan made no response. He had listened without hearing her, listening only to the sound of her voice, not to what she had said. It was a warm, pleasant voice. But there was something strangely familiar about her voice, disturbingly familiar, too. Suddenly it came to him. There was so much about her that reminded him of Beth that he stared at her. The resemblance between them was startling, a little frightening, also. Their coloring was about the same. Molly's hair and eyes were brown, just as Beth's had been. Beth had worn her hair in about the same way Molly was wearing hers. When she raised her hand to tuck in a straying strand that fluttered before her eyes, he could see Beth doing the same thing, and with the same unconscious grace. Like Beth's, Molly's skin was smooth and glowed with a healthy pink.

The longer he looked at Fisher's wife, the more it hurt him. He was so starved for Beth, and Molly looked so much like her, it was all he could do to keep himself in check when everything inside of him clamored for her and the urge to reach out for her began to mount alarmingly.

He had to get away, he told himself. His hands were clammy. He put them on the edge of the table and pushed back. He stopped abruptly when he heard her say in a tone that was both sad and musing:

"This being a homesteader isn't a way of life I'd recommend to anyone. It's particularly hard on little Johnny, because he's too young to understand. No one to play with, no one to do the things with him that he'd like to do. His father doesn't have the time. A boy needs companionship, his father's most of all when he's as young as Johnny is. And when his father can't give it to him, the boy feels neglected. His father in turn feels cheated because he doesn't get the opportunity to enjoy his young son. Reuben would have taken Johnny with him today as he promised. But in view of things, he thought it best for me to keep Johnny at home, close by, too."

Canavan nodded understandingly.

"We didn't have much in Ilinois," she went on. "But we were happy there. And we slept nights. We didn't have to worry for fear someone might steal up on us in the middle of the night and put a torch to our house."

NOW there was bitterness in her voice, and he could see it in her eyes, too, as she went on. "Here we're outcasts. No one comes near us or wants anything to do with us. Even the storekeepers. They don't want our trade. I thought Texas would be the very place for us. Texas with its vastness and its unlimited opportunities. The promised land. That's why I persuaded Reuben to give up what we had and come out here. This was where we were gong to make a new and better life for ourselves. It isn't at all what I had hoped for. It's big, all right. But its people aren't. They're little people, and they're mean and cruel. I hate Texas. I wish I'd never heard of Texas."

There was a sudden, startling, frightening burst of gunfire, not close by but somewhat distant, and yet not too far off, for the echoes of the shots carried quite clearly in

the brisk morning air. Molly stiffened. The blood drained out of her face, leaving it chalky white.

"Reuben," she said, and stood up.

The gun spilled out of her lap and fell on the floor. She looked down at it, stared at it, then bent suddenly, snatched it up and, with a cry, ran to the door. But Canavan was there ahead of her, blocking it.

"Let me out," she sobbed brokenly. "Let me out!"

"No," he said, still barring the way. "That's probably just what they'd like you to do. Run out so they can get you, too. Well, we'll fool them. I'll go. But I won't go till you've gotten hold of yourself. You've still got that boy to think of and take care of. You've got to be strong for his sake."

She stepped back. He stopped astride the threshhold and looked back at her searchingly. Her cheeks were tear-streaked, but her sobbing had ceased.

"All right?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "I'm all right now."

"Just one thing," he told her. "You stay put in here. That means don't even poke your head outside for a quick look. And stay away from the window. Y'hear?"

She nodded. He backed out, curled his hand around the door handle and pulled it to him. Then in full running stride, he dashed around the house.

III

CANAVAN stumbled to a panting stop when he spied a body he knew to be Reuben Fisher's lying face downward in a plowed field. Fisher's rifle lay just beyond his reach.

But Canavan did not rush to Fisher. Instead, suspecting that the man who had shot him might still be crouching somewhere close by and waiting in hopes of getting a shot at another of the homsteader's family, Canavan circled warily. However, a hasty search of some thin brush that fringed the field, the only cover which could possibly have been available to Fisher's attacker, failed to flush anyone out. When he was satisfied that the would-be killer had fled, Canavan ran back to Fisher. Mniutes later he was trudging back to the house with the unconscious homesteader slung over his shoulder and with Fisher's rifle clutched in his free hand.

"Molly!" he called, as he neared the house.

Molly came dashing around the house and faltered to a breathless, hesitant stop, looking at him anxiously.

"It's all right!" he yelled. "Get the bed ready and heat some water!"

She started toward him mechanically. He waved her off with the rifle, and she darted back to the house. When he rounded it, young Johnny, wide-eyed and a little open-mouthed was holding the door for him. Molly looked at the limp form of her husband, and paled.

Canavan handed her the rifle. He passed Johnny and he heard the door close.

"Knocked unconscious," he said, "but that's all. Lucky he's got a hard head. Bullet hit him just over the left ear and glanced off the temple, and aside from digging some flesh and hair out of his head, that's all the harm it did."

Molly had turned down the bed. The quilt, thrown back, was hanging over the foot board and trailing on the floor. Canavan eased his burden off his shoulder, lowered Fisher and laid him on the bed.

"Got the water on the fire?" Canavan asked as he began to take off the man's boots. They were scuffed and worn and run-down at the heels.

"The water should be hot in another minute," Molly said.

She peered at her husband anxiously. There was blood on his ear and cheek, and the hair above the ear was blood-matted.

"Oh, I'm going to need some clean rags, too," she exclaimed, and hurried away.

When she returned, carrying a pot of steaming hot water, she handed Canavan a torn bed sheet, and he ripped off a couple of strips.

Gently he washed away the blood. There was no sound from the homesteader until Canavan began to clean out the wound, a three-inch furrow of torn, raw, bleeding flesh. Fisher moaned once, and Molly put her hand against her mouth to stifle a cry. But when the wound was cleansed and ban-

daged, and Fisher lay still again, Molly drew up the quilt and tucked it in around him. Young Johnny, who stood near the foot of the bed, looking on, tugged at Canavan's sleeve.

"Will he be all right now?" the boy whispered.

Canavan nodded and patted the boy's head. When Molly removed the basin of water, Johnny brought his chair closer to the bed and hoisted himself up and, curling his sturdy little legs under him, sat cross-legged, looking down at his father. From time to time he hunched forward to peer hard at him; then eased back and sat hand-clasped. When he met his mother's eyes, he exchanged wan smiles with her, and looked away again. . . .

It was the middle of the morning when Canavan loped into Cuero with a list of grocery items that he had come to get for the Fishers. When he spied Shotten's General Store farther down the street, he headed for it at a somewhat quickened pace, pulled in at the hitch-rail and dismounted,

IN THE store a stocky, aproned man with a shiny bald head and a fringe of uncombed gray hair ringing his bald pate, whom he assumed was Shotten, was behind the counter adding up a column of figures in a worn and well-thumbed ledger with a stub of a pencil. He heard Canavan's step and said without looking up:

"Be right with you."

Canavan laid Molly's list on the counter and waited. Shotten put the pencil in his apron pocket, looked up. Canavan pointed mutely to the list, and Shotten picked it up.

"Who's this for, mister?"

"Make any difference who it's for as long as you get paid for it?" Canavan countered.

Shotten flushed a little.

"No," he said, and hastily added, " 'Course not."

Because Shotten had refused to serve Molly and had ordered her out of his place, Canavan had chosen his store to make his purchases.

"Don't mind telling you, though," he added deliberately. "It's for some folks named Fisher."

Shotten lifted his eyes. "Fisher?" he repeated.

"That's right. They're nesters."

"Oh," Shotten said. He held out the slip of paper to Canavan. "You'd better take this somewhere else."

"Nope," Caravan said evenly. "You've got what I want, so I'm buying the stuff from you."

"Sorry," the storekeeper said. He put the slip on the counter and turned away.

Canavan lunged across the counter. He caught Shotten by the arm and flung him around, grabbed him by the shirt front and held him against the counter, half bent over it.

"I'll give you two seconds to get busy on that order," he growled, his grim face barely an inch from Shotten's paling face. Beads of sweat broke out over the storekeeper's forhead. "If you know when you're well off—"

Canavan released Shotten and the storekeeper snatched up Molly's list and hurried to the rear of the store. He brought a gunny sack to the counter and hurried off again. He made a dozen trips back and forth, adding packages and bags to the swelling contents of the sack. When he had everything in the list he produced his pencil stub, totalled the prices and announced:

"Comes to three dollars even."

Canavan slapped three silver dollars on the counter. As he reached for the sack he told Shotten:

"Want to give you a tip, mister. Next time Mrs. Fisher comes in here, keep a civil tongue in your head, and take care of her same's you would anybody else. If you don't, and I have to come back here to show you the error of your ways, it'll be too bad for you. That's a promise, and you'd better remember it. Oh, give me a piece o' rope to tie this thing together."

He spied a cut piece of rope lying atop a barrel a step or two away, caught it up, and looped it around the open end of the sack, slip-knotted it, and yanked the rope tight, hoisted the sack to his shoulder and marched out to Aggie. He hung the sack from the saddle-horn, and climbed up. As he rode off Canavan glimpsed a man peering out

at him from the entrance to an alley some thirty feet away. When the man withdrew his head, Canavan frowned, but held his gaze on the spot, alertly watchful. He saw a rifle muzzle poked out, and when it was leveled he ducked instinctively. The rifle cracked. A bullet whined by overhead, and Aggie stopped dead in her tracks. Canavan's gun was half-raised for an answering shot, and it thundered angrily the moment the rifleman stepped out of the alley for a quick look in Canavan's direction. The man dropped his rifle. It thumped on the plank walk as he lurched out to the curb and fell limply into the gutter.

Almost instantly wide-eyed men and women appeared in doorways on both sides of the street. They stared at the hunched-over figure in the gutter and lifted wide, questioning eyes to Canavan.

HE WAS holstering his gun when there was a rush of booted feet behind him, and a quick look over his shoulder showed him Embree and Giffy running up the street. Aggie, not yet over her startling by the rifle shot, and the uncomfortable nearness of it, backed and pawed the ground and snorted. She subsided when Canavan spoke sharply to her. While Giffy ran on to where the fallen rifleman lay, Embree panted to a stop at Canvan's side.

"What—what happened?" he wheezed.

"Somebody took a shot at me from an alley," Canavan told him. "That feller laying in the gutter. He missed, but I didn't."

"If you'da done like I asked you," said Embree, "this wouldn't have happened."

"We got to go into that again?" Canavan asked. "And after somebody laid for Fisher this morning and pot-shotted him, too?"

"They hit him?" asked the law.

"Creased his skull."

"Long as they didn't kill him." Embree shrugged. "But getting back to you, Canavan—"

"Let's get this settled once and for all, Embree. Nobody's running me out of Cuero. When I'm ready to go, I'll go, but not before, and not because you and your friend Nye want me to."

An hour or so later, in the night that was clear and moonlit, the air brisk, Canavan was idling in front of the Fisher barn, wondering if he had done too good a job of boarding up the shattered window, for now no light at all showed from the house. He straightened up as he heard the front door open. A shadowy figure he recognized as Molly Fisher emerged and began sauntering about, every now and then looking skyward. Then she was coming toward him.

"Thought you folks had turned in," he remarked.

"I've been sewing," Molly told him. "When I finished, I decided to get a breath of air before I went to bed . . . It's a beautiful night, isn't it?"

"Yes. Reuben all right?"

"He's fast asleep."

Together they walked toward the barn.

"Reuben put that barn up?" Canavan asked.

"No. It was here when we got here. Reuben had to do quite a lot of work on it to make it usable. Some day he hopes to paint it."

"Uh-huh."

"The house was here, too. We lived in our wagon while Reuben made the shanty habitable. It still needs work done on it. But I suppose that will be done in time. Canavan, what do you do for a living?"

"I don't do anything," he replied. "I haven't done anything these last few years. Just wandered around."

"That isn't much of a life, is it?"

"No."

"Doesn't it get tiresome?"

"Yeah, it does."

"Then why don't you do something about it?"

"I'm too restless. Can't stay put anywhere for long. Have to be on the move. That's why I can't take a job."

"But a man has to take root somewhere and grow, doesn't he?"

He didn't answer.

"Don't you want the things that most other men want?" she continued. "A wife, a place of your own?"

"I've had them."

"Oh," she said, a little taken aback. "What—happened to them?"

"Lost them. That is, I lost my wife and I gave up the place."

"Oh," she said again, inadequately.

"When she died, just about everything inside of me died too. Since then nothing's mattered. Chances are nothing ever will matter again."

They halted unconsciously when they came to the barn.

"Had you been married long when it happened?" Molly asked.

"No. Only a little over a year."

"How awful for you! What was she like?"

TWICE A KILLER

TWO cowpunchers lounged in the bunkhouse, watching with high interest as the cook donned his fancy duds for a night on the town.

Said one cowhand, "You can say this for the old boy—when he's off the ranch, he dresses to kill."

"Yeah," replied the other, "and when he's on the ranch, he cooks the same way."

—Jack Kytle

"She could've passed for your sister."

"Really?"

"She looked like you, and sounded like you."

"What was her name?"

"Beth."

MOLLY hurried on, "Canavan, I'm sure Beth would be terribly distressed if she knew you've practically stopped living. Life for the living isn't supposed to end when a loved one dies. The living have to go on living despite their grief. You're still a young man, Johnny Canavan. Life is waiting for you to pick up where you left off, and make something of it. And I'm sure you can."

There was no response.

"It would be easier for you than for Reuben."

He looked at her inquiringly. She answered his unspoken question.

"This isn't the kind of life for Reuben. At heart he's a man of books, a dreamer. He's a farmer because of necessity, because it's the only way he sees to support his family. His kind wasn't born to fight. It's different with you. You have all the necessary physical attributes for this kind of life. Out here the man who can fight for what he wants, who won't let anyone ride roughshod over him, he's the one who will make something of himself if he has the will to do it."

He was looking in the direction of the house. A man was silhouetted in the open doorway by turned-down lamplight behind him.

"Reuben," Canavan said quickly.

"Oh," Molly said, and ranged her eyes after his. "I hope you aren't angry with me. I know it isn't anyone's business what you do with yourself or with your life. It's just that—well, I don't like to see anyone give up when there's so much to be got out of life."

"Molly!" Fisher called. "That you down there?"

"Yes, Reuben!" she called back. "Just getting a breath of air. I'll be along directly. Good night, Canavan."

"Good night, Molly."

As she neared the house, Reuben opened the door wider. The lamplight glowed brighter. She entered the house and the door closed behind her. Canavan backed slowly against the barn.

IV

THE next morning when Reuben Fisher summoned Canavan to breakfast, he didn't trudge down to the barn to do it; he stood in the doorway of the house and beckoned to him. Fisher was still wearing the bandage around his head that Canavan had fashioned for him.

"Morning," Canavan said as he came up to the door. "How's the head?"

"Oh, all right," Fisher answered. "Breakfast is ready."

Canavan could smell coffee, and something cooking as he entered. This time, though,

Fisher didn't take Canavan's hat from him; Canavan hung it on the door nail himself. Molly, bringing the coffee pot to the table, smiled at him and murmured, "Good morning." He smiled back at her.

Fisher had already seated himself. "Sit down," he said. Canavan took the same chair that he had occupied before. Shortly Molly took her place at the table, too. Canavan was a little surprised when Fisher failed to offer his usual mealtime prayer. The homesteader reached for the bacon, served himself, and pushed the platter back into the middle of the table.

Canavan, glancing at him, wondered, What's biting him today? And he shook his head when Molly sought to serve him.

"Just coffee, thanks," he told her.

"Nonsense," she said. "What kind of a breakfast is that for a man? Give me your plate, please."

"If he isn't hungry, Molly," Fisher said, reaching for a biscuit, "don't force it on him."

There was little conversation. What little talking there was was done by Molly. Canavan answered when she spoke directly to him, mostly remarking about the weather, but he made no conversation of his own. Finished eating, Fisher pushed back from the table and stood up. His wife looked up at him.

"You didn't eat much, Reuben," she said. "Are you sure you feel all right?"

"I feel fine," he said, rather curtly, though. He walked to the door, lifted his hat off the nail before he said to Canavan, "I suppose you'll be leaving us today."

"That's right. I'll be pulling out this morning."

Fisher picked up his rifle which was propped up against the wall and went out. He didn't bother to close the door. It swung to by itself behind him. His step outside faded out.

Canavan glanced at Molly. There was a faint flush in her cheeks.

"Sure you won't change your mind and eat something?" she asked.

"Coffee was all I wanted this morning."

"All right," she said. "Will we see you again?"

He shook his head.

"But you'll be coming back to Cuero again some day, won't you?"

"No. I've had enough of Cuero, and Cuero's probably had enough of me."

"I want to apologize for Reuben," she murmured.

"Don't. Every man's allowed to wake up feeling out of sorts every now and then."

"He wasn't even civil to you—as though he'd already forgotten how much he owes you."

"Maybe that's what's bothering him."

Her expression showed she didn't understand.

"Too much indebtedness," he explained, "can make a man resentful. He can even get to hate the guts of the man he's indebted to. It's happened many times. So don't get down on Reuben. He'll come around all right once I'm gone." Canavan got to his feet. Molly arose, too. "Thanks for everything," he told her with a grave smile. "And say good-by to the boy for me."

She followed him to the door. He retrieved his hat and put it on.

"By," he said to her over his shoulder.

WHEN he was striding down to the barn, Canavan looked back, she was standing in the doorway. When he led Aggie out of the barn, she was still standing there, and young Johnny was with her. Canavan, bending to tighten Aggie's belly cinch, heard running steps, and eased around on his haunches. Johnny Fisher skidded to a stop in front of him.

"Hello, son," Canavan said

"H'llo," the boy said. "You going away?"

"That's right."

"Do you have to go?"

"'Fraid so, Johnny."

"What's his name?" The boy was pointing to the mare.

"It isn't a him. It's a her."

"Oh! Well, what's her name?"

"Aggie," Canavan answered gravely.

"Aggie?" Johnny repeated. "That's a funny name for a horse." He asked eagerly, "Can I ride her?"

"Sure."

Canavan lifted him, set him down in the

saddle, and handed him the reins.

Johnny rode in a circle; completing it, he returned. When Canavan nodded, the boy repeated the circle and halted again in front of Canavan.

"Just once more, please?" he begged.

"All right."

"Johnny!" Canavan recognized Reuben Fisher's voice calling. "Get down, Johnny! Canavan has things to do and you're holding him back!"

"Sorry, pardner," Canavan said to the boy.

"Aw, gee," Johnny said grumpily. "Just when I was having such a good time."

Canavan lifted him out of the saddle and put him down on the ground. He curled his own hand around the saddle-horn and pulled himself up on Aggie's back.

"By, Johnny," he called as he rode away.

It was still rather early when Canavan loped into Cuero. Drawing rein, he walked Aggie down the street, The lunchroom was open, and Canavan pulled up in front of it, left Aggie at the curb, and went inside. There was no one about. But there was movement behind the swinging door that led to the kitchen.

"Be right with you," a man's voice called.

Then the man pushed through the swinging door. A lanky individual with slicked-black hair, blue garters with rosettes on the sleeves of his soiled white shirt, a string tie that was frayed and faded, and a stained apron tied around his middle.

Canavan sat down on one of the stools, thumbed his hat up from his forehead and hunched over his folded arms.

"Breakfast, mister?" the lunch room owner asked.

"Yeah. Bacon and eggs."

"Right." The man trudged back into the kitchen.

Canavan rose and sauntered across the room to the open doorway where he stood staring out moodily.

Hooves drummed upstreet, and he poked his head out. A horseman who was coming on at a canter pulled up suddenly when he spotted Canavan. He wheeled his horse and sent him pounding upstreet, taking the westward road out of town.

Canavan walked back to his stool. He was hungry ,and made short work of his breakfast. Just as he took his last swallow of his second cup of coffee, there was a heavy step beside him, and when a bulky body hoisted itself onto the stool next to his, instinctively he knew it was the sheriff.

"Every time I think I'm liable to have some peace and quiet around here," Embree grumbled, "you have to show up."

"I was afraid if I stayed away too long I might get out of touch with things," Canavan answered lightly.

"I sure wish you had some place to go," sighed the lawman.

"Mean you're tired of seeing me around so soon?"

"You know damned well what I mean, and why I want to see you out of here!"

EMBREE hoisted himself to his feet, turned on his heel, and stalked out to the street. Canavan got up, paid for his breakfast, and headed for the door. He was about a step from it when a rifle cracked, and a bullet shattered the front window, spewing pieces and jagged slivers of glass in every direction. Canavan flung himself toward the wall, yanking out his gun. There was a yell from the kitchen, the swinging door was flung open and the lanky proprietor burst out.

He stared hard at the window with quivering pieces of glass jutting out of the framework.

"Get back!" Canavan barked at him. "Get back before you get your head shot off!"

As if in answer, there was a sudden burst of gunfire. Bullets thudded into the counter, the wall behind it, tearing bits of plaster from it, and the stools. The proprietor beat a hasty retreat. On hands and knees, Canavan crawled along the wall to the front door and stole a cautious look outside. When he glimpsed two riflemen peering out from an alley diagonally across the street from the lunch room, he raised up and flung two shots at them and hurriedly backed off. There was prompt response. Rifle and Colt fire straddled the doorway, riddled and splintered the framework. A bullet struck the lamp that hung from the ceiling, and shattered the

globe. Tiny pieces of glass tinkled on the floor. The proprietor crawled out from the kitchen, hissed, and Canavan looked around at him.

"They after you, those fellers out there?"

"Unless they're after you," Canavan said.

"Me?" the lanked man repeated. "What for? I never did anything to anybody. Why should they be after me?"

"You've got me there, pardner." Canavan grinned, and added, "Y'think it could be they want to get square with you on account of what they've been eating here?"

"Aw, now—"

A crescendo of the attackers' fire outside stopped a reply, and sent the man scurrying back to the kitchen.

There was little opportunity now for Canavan to get in a shot at the attackers unless he was willing to offer himself as a target. He huddled low in a corner, fretting and debating what to do. Now he knew why that horseman had ridden off so hurriedly after he had spotted him. He had been one of Coley Nye's hands. Informed that Canavan was in Cuero, Nye had hastily dispatched his outfit to town. Canavan was sure that Nye's instructions had been as final as death itself, a "get him or else" order.

The pattern of the attackers' fire was simplicity itself. It swept across the lunch room from wall to wall, leaving nothing untouched. The counter and the stools were wrecked; the plaster was shot off, and the boards that formed the walls riddled and splintered. The swinging door was subjected to a withering blast that split it in two. One half broke off of its own weight and fell to the floor; another burst of gunfire tore the remaining half off its hinges and dropped it on top of the first.

"Hey, Mac!" Canavan yelled above the din of the shooting.

"Yeah?" the proprietor yelled back. "You want me?"

"I think they're building up to rush the place," Canavan told him. "Got a back door?"

"Yeah, sure!"

"Then you'd better use it!"

"Think I ought to go now?"

"Yes! While the going's still good!"

Canavan inched over the floor to the doorway, poked his gun out and emptied it in a blind burst of gunfire. Then hastily backing away, he reloaded. He backed into the kitchen on his hands and knees, twisted around when he reached the door, and turned the door knob. The door didn't open.

He tried it again. Because he pulled hard on the turning knob, the door opened, but only a crack. He peered out. A rope had been twisted around the knob outside, to prevent the door from being opened from the inside.

"Why, that son-uva-gun! That miserable—!"

HE STOPPED the torrent of angry, bitter words when he realized that he might be blaming the wrong man for shutting off his only avenue of escape. Maybe it wasn't the lanky man's doing. Maybe a Nye hand had been posted at the back door to guard against Canavan's breaking out. The man had permitted the lunch room owner to emerge, then he had sealed off the door with his rope. Canavan was grim-faced.

Bullets slammed into the walls and into the door behind him. He crawled out of the kitchen and crouched behind the end of the shattered counter. He sank down on the floor and lay flat on his belly. When he raised his head and peered out, he could see the street.

Suddenly he was concerned about Aggie. There was no sign of her. He decided she must have trotted away when the shooting broke out, and he felt relieved.

A bandy-legged, dark-faced man, with a half-raised rifle in his hands came squarely into view directly across the street, and stepped down into the gutter to cross. Canavan's gun levelled, and roared. The man pitched forward and fell on his face with the rifle still clutched in his hands under him. Then two other men—a short, stocky one, and a tall, gangling, mustached and pigeon-toed individual—ran up from the sloping depths of an alley, halted a little breathlessly in the entrance to it, and looked over at the wrecked lunch room. When the shorter of the two started toward a nearby vacant store, apparently to use its doorway for cover,

Canavan's Colt voiced a protest. The man stumbled and slumpetd down on the walk. His companion ran to him and tried to help him, but the fallen man sank lower, and the man with the mustache, sensing that he was beyond help, stepped back from him, jerked out his own gun, and in a show of anger shot twice at the lunch room. One bullet shattered a glass fragment that was jutting out of the window frame; another thudded into the counter and spewed tiny bits of splintered wood on the floor.

Canavan fired back. His bullet caught the man squarely in the chest. He clutched at himself, sagged suddenly and fell headlong over the legs of the doomed man.

There was no more shooting after that. The echoes of the gun blasting seemed to hang in the morning air. Gradually, though, they began to lift and fade out. Canavan crawled to the wall and, half bent over, inched to the door and stole a quick look outside. The bandy-legged rifleman who had fallen in the middle of the gutter lay in a widening pool of blood. Some of it had already begun to blend with the churned up dirt. Canavan's eyes searched the alleys and doorways opposite for further signs of attackers, but there were none. He wondered if that meant they had abandoned the attack without making a converging rush upon the place as he had expected them to do. It might well be that they had withdrawn to discuss some new strategy and that the respite was only temporary.

In the midst of his conjecturing, he noticed people in the street. The women did not show any desire to view the dead men any too closely, and stood back from them; the men gathered around the three bodies, talking among themselves almost guardedly, and glanced across the street at Canavan every now and then. When he saw Embree and Giffy coming up the street, Canavan stepped out on the walk. Giffy slanted across to where the rifleman lay, while the sheriff, a bit flushed, came striding up to Canavan and said:

"Had yourself a time of it, didn't you?"

"I didn't start it, so don't go blaming it on me. Beside, you're the law here, or supposed to be. How come you didn't step in and stop it? Or couldn't you and your pardner get out from under your beds?"

Embree's flush became a deep scarlet.

"Now, just a minute, Canavan," he began sputteringly.

"No," Canavan said curtly, "you wait. One of those two laying across the street was one of the fellows I handed over to you at Fisher's place. I've been meaning all along to ask you what you'd done about them. Now I know. You turned them loose the minute you got out of my sight that morning, didn't you?"

THE sheriff retorted heatedly, "I didn't do anything of the kind! Soon as Nye heard I had two of his hands, he came after them."

"And you handed them over just like that."

"You're wrong about that, too."

"Yeah?" Canavan taunted. "Then why don't you tell me what happened and set me straight?"

"When eight men with guns in their hands come busting in on you, you don't argue with them. You do like they say and you give them what they want."

"But you told Nye that that wasn't the end of it, didn't you? That the law—"

"I didn't tell him anything!"

"You're quite a lawman, Embree. You've got no more right wearing that star than—"

"Than you maybe?"

Canavan's eyes glinted. "When I wore it," he replied steadily, "nobody ever accused me of being afraid of my own shadow."

"N-o, but they accused you of other things, didn't they?"

Canavan shouldered him out of his way and marched off. Aggie, standing in front of a hitch-rail a couple of doors beyond the lunch room, looked up when he approached. Recognizing him, she backed away from the rail and plodded along after him.

V

CANAVAN lifted his gaze when he heard approaching hoofbeats. He saw Molly Fisher, with her young son sitting in front of her, riding down the street astride the

family horse, a plodding, wearied and rather-dejected-looking animal. When they came abreast of him, Molly smiled and Canavan acknowledged it with a grave lift of his hat. Johnny called to him and he smiled back at the boy. They trotted past him, turned in to the rail in front of Shotten's place. Molly climbed down, reached for Johnny, and helped him down. When they emerged from the store, Canavan was waiting for them. Johnny was clutching two small packages.

"Get what you wanted?" Canavan asked.

"Oh, yes," Molly said lightly.

"Good."

"Mr. Shotten was rather gumpy at first," she went on. "But he happened to glance out the window once and he must have seen you, because his attitude changed after that, and he was friendly enough."

Canavan untied their horse, held the stirrup for Molly and helped her into the saddle. Then he booster Johnny up, helped him settle himself in front of his mother.

"Find you were out of something you forgot to have me get for you?" Canavan asked.

"Yes . . . Oh, incidentally, we have neighbors now. Six families. They came by our place shortly after you left. It will be nice to have someone to visit with."

His eyes held on her, clung to her as though he were committing to memory every feature, every detail of her face. She flushed a little under his steady, almost embarrassing gaze. Now he knew what it was that was keeping him in Cuero. It wasn't what he had told the sheriff. He had thought he was telling Embree the truth; he hadn't realized then that there was a far better reason for his refusal to move on, and that the reason was Molly. He wanted her. Fisher didn't appreciate her, didn't deserve her, either. But he, Canavan, was her kind of man. Hadn't she said as much. Admittedly, not right out, nor in so many words. But the meaning had been there, all right. Hadn't she told him he could go far, that he was the kind of man who would fight for what he wanted and who would get it and who wouldn't let anyone take it away from him? Did any woman tell that to a man if she didn't want him in place of the one she had already?

He wanted to tell her in a swift rush of eager words that she was not returning to Reuben Fisher, that he was taking her away with him. She would give him the purpose in life he hadn't had for such a long time. For her he would be able to find himself again, do the things he was capable of doing. It would be a new and a good life for him, and for her, too.

Fisher couldn't offer her anything that could compare with it. Life with him held no promise. A man who apparently lived within himself, would accept his lot. But every time he met Molly's eyes, he would see in them a look of resentment that would make him retreat even deeper into his shell, and he would become even less communicative than he was ordinarily. Brooding and embittered, she would come to hate him, and he would hate her because of her unwillingness to accept their lot more gracefully. Canavan was unwilling to believe that she would reject what life with him offered her, and return to Fisher.

Suddenly, though, he was aware of a strange and frightened look in Molly's eyes. She knew what he was thinking, had sensed it somehow. But the frightened look worried him. It could mean only one thing,—that she was afraid that if she stayed there even one minute longer that his desires would communicate themselves to her, and that she would yield to them. She wanted to, yet she was afraid. Flushing, she averted her eyes, and backed her horse away from the rail.

" 'By," she called as she wheeled the animal.

" 'By!" Johnny yelled.

CANAVAN didn't answer. Bitterly disappointed, he watched them ride away. He drew a deep breath. Now he could go. There was nothing to keep him in Cuero.

He strode into Shotten's, bought some bacon, flour, and coffee and stuffed them into his saddle-bags. He flung a last bitter-eyed look at the town, climbed up on Aggie's back, and rode off. A mile or two out of town he spied an oncoming horseman, and pulled the drumming mare off the middle of the road. Minutes later, the townward-bound horse-

ıan and he came together. The oncoming ider was the sheriff. The two men halted ıeir mounts.

"Got something to tell you, Embree," Canavan announced.

"Only thing I want to hear from you is hat you're leaving Cuero," Embree answered grumpily.

"That's what I want to tell you."

"Huh? That doesn't mean you'll think ifferent about it after awhile and come back, oes it?"

"I won't be back."

They sat facing each other in silence. It vas the sheriff who broke it.

"Sorry we had words, Canavan," he said.

"Forget it."

"Where are you heading for?"

"California."

They backed away from each other.

"So long," Canavan said.

"So long, Canavan," the sheriff responded, and good luck."

A mile slipped behind Canavan, then anther. Suddenly the cut-through that led o the Fisher place was just ahead of them. He slowed the mare as he neared it, stopped er when he came to it, stood up in the stirups, and with eager eyes probed the hometead that lay inland from the road. There vas no one about, not even young Johnny. Canavan held his gaze on the house, hoping hat the door would open and that Molly vould come out so that he might have one ast look at her. But it didn't open, and after while when he realized the futility of waitng any longer, he sank down in the saddle, lisappointment showing in his face and in is rounded shoulders.

Aggie set her own pace, but Canavan did ıot interfere with her. He was satisfied to et her go on as she pleased.

Twice they passed small herds of grazing attle. Each time, as they neared the unched steers, they were greeted by a deephroated lowing; but once they were past, he cattle resumed grass munching.

Then suddenly, when Canavan happened o be lazing in the saddle, Aggie whinnied nd slowed to a mere walk. Canavan looked ıp. Coming toward them at an awkward and umbering lope was a riderless horse. The stirrups of his empty saddle swung and thumped against his sides and belly.

There was no brand on him, Canavan noticed. That would mean he belonged to a nester. Homesteaders never branded their horses, not even their few heads of stock.

Wonder what he's doing around here? Canavan mused. If a cattleman gets his hands on him, the nester owner will never see him again.

He rode on again. The nester horse loped after him. Twice Canavan shooed off the pursuing horse; the animal simply circled around, and the moment Canavan settled himself, the pursuit was on again. Then all of a sudden, when Canavan was sweeping the range with his hand-shaded eyes, seeking a sign of a thrown rider, he spotted something in the thick grass some distance away that made him swerve Aggie and send her bounding toward it. As they neared the spot, there was a cry, and a tow-headed, sobbing boy arose. Skidding up to him in a stiff-legged stride, Aggie came to a panting halt. Canavan flung himself off the mare's back, caught the sobbing boy in his arms, and dropped to his knees with him. Johnny flung his sturdy little arms around Canavan's neck and clung to him, his body heaving as his frightened crying continued.

"All right, Johnny," Canavan soothed him. "You're all right now. I've got you. So don't cry."

THE boy's sobbing tapered off shortly, and when it finally ceased, Canavan produced his bandanna, wiped his eyes, made him blow his nose too. He lifted the boy into the saddle, climbed up behind him, hooked a protective arm around him and said lightly:

"Don't want to lose you now that I've just found you."

There was no need for him to ask what had happened. Somehow Johnny had managed to get upon the Fisher horse, and the animal had simply run off with him.

"I hit him to make him go faster," he heard Johnny say. "Then I tried to stop him, to make him turn around. But he wouldn't. He went even faster. And I got frightened."

"Uh-huh. And when you saw your chance

you jumped off."

"Yes," Johnny acknowledged. "I wanted to go home."

"Good thing for you the grass 'round here is thick, and cushioned your fall. Otherwise you might have broken your neck."

The Fisher horse trotted up as they wheeled in the direction of the homestead, and loped after them.

They were probably a mile from it when Johnny suddenly sat upright and pointed excitedly. Canavan, raising up, saw a half-walking, half-running figure coming toward them. It was Molly. Johnny yelled to her and his voice carried across the range. She faltered to a stumbling, exhausted stop, and, raising her head, stared hard. Johnny yelled again. She lurched forward, forgetting her weariness, and came flying over the grass. Canavan halted the mare, swung down with Johnny, and watched him run into his mother's arms. She held him tight, rocked with him, and cried a little, too. She was dabbing at her eyes with a balled-up handkerchief when Canavan, with Aggie plodding along at his heels, came up to her. "Thanks so much, Canavan. Thanks so very much."

"Don't thank me," he objected. "I didn't do anything. I just happened to be passing when Johnny popped up, and all I did was boost him up in front of me, and—well, here he is."

"Hm," she said, and her expression indicated that she wasn't completely satisfied that that was all he had done.

"When we returned from town," she explained, "he pleaded with me to let him ride our horse around in front of the barn as you had let him ride yours. I went on to the house to put away the things I'd bought from Mr. Shotten. I don't think it took me more than a minute or two. But when I came out, Johnny was gone."

"Gave you quite a scare, huh?"

"Yes. You have no idea what awful thoughts came to me. I was sure he'd been stolen, kidnaped, by one of the cattlemen. I —I got hysterical. I ran all the way to where Reuben was working, and told him. I never saw him so enraged. It was my fault, he told me, and added that if anything happened to Johnny, he would never forgive me."

Canavan made no comment.

"Reuben hurried off to get the other home steaders," she continued, "to help him searc for Johnny."

"Uh-huh."

"They're some four miles from our plac Since Reuben was on foot, I don't suppos he's got to them yet."

"Maybe I ought to ride after him an tell him Johnny's home," Canavan sugges ted.

"Oh, would you, Canavan?"

The Fisher horse had halted a short dis tance away. He offered no resistance whe Canavan took him by the bit and led hir back to where Molly and Johnny were wai ing. Canavan held the stirrup for Molly helped her mount, and when she was settle in the saddle with her skirts tucked in unde her legs, he lifted Johnny, sat him in fror of her, passed her the reins.

Their eyes met and held. Molly flushed little under his steady gaze. She jerked th reins and rode away. Canavan swung up o Aggie's back, wheeled her and drumme northward. After he had covered about mile, he slanted northeastwardly. Half mile farther he spied a trotting figure som hundreds of yards ahead of him. He cuppe one hand around his mouth, yelled, and Reu ben Fisher stumbled to an awkward stop an looked back. Canavan motioned to him t wait.

Minutes later Canavan pulled up at Fish er's side. The homesteader, chest heavin wheezing, and exhausted-looking, lifted hi eyes questioningly.

"He's home, Fisher," Canavan told him.

RELIEF showed in the homesteader face.

"He—he's all right?"

"Yeah, sure."

"That boy," Fisher said, with a shake o his head. He took out a bandanna an mopped his sweaty face. "I'll have to d something about him."

"All he needs is a little companionship, Canavan said quietly. "His father's mor than anybody else's. Now how about m giving you a ride back? You look kind beat and it's a mile or so to your place."

He kicked his foot free of the stirrup, reached down and helped the homesteader swing up behind him.

VI

AGGIE rounded the house at a trot, and as she pulled up in front of it, the door opened and Molly came out.

"Oh," she said when she saw her husband. Without looking at Canavan, she said, "You overtook him."

Fisher climbed down.

"Canavan says the boy's all right," he said to his wife.

"Yes," she answered. "It was a frightening experience for him, and while he appears to be over it, I don't think he is completely. I hope you aren't going to punish him, Reuben."

"No," Fisher told her. "Of course not."

She looked relieved.

"He's inside, Reuben, if you want to talk to him. I think you should."

Fisher nodded, and went into the house. As the door closed behind him, Molly raised her eyes to Canavan.

"Aren't you going to get down?" she asked.

"N-o, I don't think so," he replied. "I think it'll be better if I get going again."

She didn't say anything, made no detaining gesture. But then there was a not too distant rumble of wagon wheels, and Canavan shot a questioning look at Molly. She followed him, wonderingly, to the side of the house, and ranged her gaze after his. From a northward direction came a strung-out line of swaying, cumbersome wagons, canvas-topped prairie schooners. They heard the front door open. Reuben Fisher came to his wife's side, and peered hard at the lumbering schooners.

The driver of the first wagon spied him.

"Didn't I tell you camping out was fun?"

and waved.

Fisher said, "Looks like the Wiggenses in the lead wagon." He took another look. "Yes, it is the Wiggenses. Now what do you suppose has happened to them?"

The answer was all too obvious, and Canavan was glad the question hadn't been directed at him. His reply might have been a little too curt. He glanced at Fisher and asked himself, He have to ask a question like that? Can't he figure out for himself what must've happened? Does he have to be told that those nesters have been driven off? He shook his head sadly.

Canavan counted five more wagons strung out behind the Wiggens' schooner. He backed Aggie out of the way as the first wagon came trundling houseward. Molly moved back, too. With Fisher leading the way, the wagons rolled past the house and pulled up in front of the barn in a solid line. Men and women began to climb to the ground. They crowded around Fisher, and listened attentively to what he said to them.

"They seem to look up to Reuben, don't they?" Canavan remarked.

"Yes," Molly agreed. "Probably that's why he's so glad to see them." She added, "In all fairness to him, they know he was a schoolteacher back home, and they have respect for him. Your Texans don't, and he feels it keenly."

"Molly!"

It was Fisher calling, turned away for the moment from his listeners.

"Y-es, Reuben?"

"Put on some coffee!"

Molly murmured an "Excuse me, please" to Canavan and went into the house. Fisher and the others were coming up from the barn. Some of the homesteaders looked at Canavan; Fisher didn't. A couple of them trooped inside after Fisher; the others halted and idled outside. A pretty young woman with a shawl draped loosely around her shoulders, stood a little apart from the others. She looked up at Canavan, smiled and said "Hello."

He touched the brim of his hat.

"You aren't one of those awful cattlemen, are you?" she asked.

"No."

"Live around here?"

"Just visiting, you might say."

"Oh?"

SHE waited, apparently expecting him to tell her more. When he didn't, she asked, "Your family with you?"

"Haven't any."

"Oh," she said again. "I guess that gives us something in common. I haven't anyone either. My husband died shortly after we started out. Since there wasn't anything to return to—" she shrugged—"I came on."

"Quite a trip to make by yourself."

She smiled widely.

"Yes . . . What's your name?"

"Canavan."

"I'm Doreen Gregg. Are you a friend of the Fishers?"

"I like to think so."

"What do you do?"

"Oh, I do a lot of things." He corrected himself. "Leastways, I can do a lot of things. But I'm not doing anything now 'cept heading for California."

"Really?" Her eyes were bright and wide. "I've heard it's wonderful country out there."

"It is."

"You mean you've been there already?"

"About a year and a half ago."

"I wish I was going out there," she said wistfully. "Are you—going alone?"

"That's right."

Her hands were on her hips now, her shoulders squared back. Her breasts were thrust forward, and seemed to be straining for freedom against the restricting blouse of her dress. Her lips were parted, moist and inviting, her eyes bold and challenging. Someone came out of the house and came toward them. Quickly she drew her shawl closer around her, criss-crossing the ends of it over her breasts. Molly stopped within a couple of feet of her. There was an angry flush in her cheeks, Canavan noticed.

"Coffee's ready," she announced to Doreen rather stiffly.

Doreen gave her a smile.

"Oh, thank you," she said.

Molly turned on her heel and stalked away.

There was a sudden cry, and every head turned. A woman pointed excitedly in the direction from which the wagon train had come.

"Look!" she shrilled. "They're coming here now!"

In the distance Canavan could hear the rhythmic, drumming beat of horses' hooves. The beat swelled and came steadily closer and closer. Canavan glanced at the homesteaders who were standing about in front of the house. There were grim faces here and there, but there were frightened ones, too, and they were in the majority. The door was flung open and Reuben Fisher burst out. Five horsemen whirled past the house, pulled up, and wheeled around and rode back to it. The man in the lead, a lean, graying man who appeared to be the boss of the band, sat back in his saddle while the other horsemen formed a half circle behind him. When they looked at the homesteaders, Canavan could see the taunt in their eyes and the scornful twist to their lips.

"All right, you people," their leader began curtly. He had thin lips and a cold voice. "Get back to your wagons, and get rolling. And don't stop till you're across the county line. You—" he indicated Fisher—"get your gear and clear out of here. I'll give you exactly five minutes to get your stuff out." He nodded toward the house. "What's still in there after that goes up with the house. Now get moving."

Canavan shot a look at Fisher. The homesteader's face was a chalky white, and twin, matching red balls in his cheeks burned against the stark whiteness. Now, Canavan told himself, the others who looked to Reuben for leadership would get a close-up view of him when he was called upon to take a firm stand.

"Well?" the lean man demanded impatiently. When Fisher did not move, he said simply, "All right, Fisher. If that's the way you want it." He turned his head. "Carly, I think he's going to need some help getting himself started. Want to see what you can do for him?"

A RATHER husky man who was sitting his horse almost directly behind him, swung down, and said:

"A hefty boot in the pants oughta do the trick for him, Boss." He was thick-legged, pigeon-toed man who lumbered rather than walked.

A gun roared suddenly. A bullet ploughed dirt squarely in front of him, spewed it over his boots and he stopped instantly. Slowly his head turned. When his angry eyes found Canavan, he glared.

"Get back to your horse," Canavan ordered, gesturing with his gun.

Slowly, reluctantly, the glowering Carly obeyed. "You, mister," Canavan said, and lifted his eyes to the graying man. "You own this property?"

"What business is it of yours?"

"I'm making it my business," Canavan answered, "and you can make anything you like out of that. This is rangeland, free and open to anyone who wants to register it and work it. You'd better tell blue shirt back of you to keep his hands away from his gun, or I'll drill a hole right smack through the middle of him."

"Sit, Deac," the lean leader of the band said over his shoulder, and the man whose inching hand had caught Canavan's eye folded his arms over his chest. Carly hoisted himself up on his horse's back. Then the graying man said, "All right, boys. Let's go."

The five horses were backed; however only four of them were wheeled away. Carly, still glowering at Canavan, hung back. But after a moment, apparently realizing the futility of it, he lashed his horse and sent him pounding away after the others. Canavan, holstering his gun, saw relief in the faces of most of the homesteaders, but not in Fisher's. The homesteader looked up at him and shook his head.

"What's the matter?" Canavan asked.

"I wish you hadn't done that, Canavan."

"Oh?"

"I suppose you think you did us a service, and that we should feel grateful to you. Frankly, I think you did us a disservice, that whatever chance we might have had of persuading that man Fleming to take a more reasonable attitude toward us is gone now."

"I see. You mean that if I hadn't inter-

fered, and if I had let you take another walloping, that Fleming might have felt sorry for you and maybe changed his mind about driving you folks off? Just how many wallopings d'you have to take before you get wise to the fact that you can't reason with or expect any sympathy out of a hard man who's got what he has the hard way, and who knows only one way—the hard way, tough way—of dealing with others?" As Canavan started to move away he flung back at Fisher:

"Are you blind, or just plain, downright stupid? Can you understand that kowtowing isn't going to get your anywhere? Fisher, the best thing you can do, and this goes for your friends, too, is pull out of here and head back to where you came from. Back to your farms, your stores, your books and your schoolhouse, because that's where you belong and where you should have stayed."

"Now just a minute, Canavan—"

"Just a minute yourself! I'm not finished yet. Texas isn't the place for you people. This is a hard, rugged way of life, and the only ones who can hope to make a go of it out here are those who can stand on their own two feet. You're soft and kowtowy and the people you're trying to move in on are hard. Because they know you haven't got the guts to stand up to them, they ride roughshod over you, trample you underfoot, run you off one place after another. Yet you think you can reason with them!"

There was no response from Fisher. The color that had drained out of his face, returned to it, flooding and flushing it.

"Maybe I shouldn't have horned in," Canavan went on. "Maybe I should have let you take another walloping. Maybe it would have done you some good.

"Well, from now on you can collect all the walloping you like. I won't be around to butt in and spoil things for you."

He nudged Aggie with his knees, and she raised her head and plodded away from the house. But instead of wheeling westward when he came to the end of the cut-through, he took the road that led back to Cuero . . . .

IT WAS night. Canavan who had engaged a room in the local hotel, was in his room, lying in bed on the flat of his back, with his clasped hands pillowing his head, his eyes staring moodily into the shadowy darkness around him. After awhile he sat up, swung his legs over the side of the bed, groped for his boots, found them and pulled them on. His hat and gun-belt were on the chair next to the bed; he put on his hat, buckled on his gun and stamped out. A lamp with a turned-down wick guided his steps to the stairway at the far end of the landing. As he started down, a bulky figure started up the stairs. They stopped and looked at each other.

"Oh, hello, Embree," Canavan said.

The sheriff eyed him and frowned.

"And I thought we'd seen the last of you. No such luck though, huh? Mind telling me what brought you back?"

"Something came up."

"And you came back to take care of it. How long d'you figure it'll take you?"

" 'Fraid I can't tell you that, Sheriff. It all depends."

"On what?"

"On the way things work out."

"That doesn't tell me anything."

"Well, when you go asking questions that don't have any answers, what do you expect?"

Canavan came down the stairs, and squeezed past Embree.

"I'm not finished with you yet, damn it!" Embree sputtered.

Canavan looked up at him. "That's where you're wrong, Sheriff," he said evenly. "We were finished with each other a long time ago, only you didn't have enough sense to know it."

He stalked out to the shadowy street, crossed it, and went up the steps to the saloon veranda and on inside. The place was deserted. Tuck Wells greeted him with a quick smile and asked:

"How's tricks, pardner?"

"Oh, so-so. Where's all your trade tonight?"

"Middle of the week it's always slow."

"Oh!"

"What'll it be?"

"Beer."

"Coming up."

Wells served Canavan and sauntered off.

A man with a heavy-legged, lumbering swagger came in. Canavan recognized Carly, but gave no sign of recognition. Carly simply stared at Canavan for a moment, then walked up to the bar and leaned over it.

There was the sound of bootsteps outside, and two men appeared in the doorway. Canavan recognized both. One was Deac, the blue-shirted puncher with the inching gun hand. His companion was another Fleming hand, a thin man with a long neck, a jerking Adam's apple and twitching jaw muscles. Deac led the way inside. Meeting Canavan's eyes with a stony stare as he came abreast of him, he walked on to the far end of the bar and turned around there. The other man backed against the side wall opposite Canavan.

Glancing at Tuck Wells, Canavan saw a look of apprehension in his eyes, and he said:

"It's all right, Tuck. I've been braced before."

He put down his glass and eased himself around with his elbows thrust back and resting on the edge of the bar, with his hands dangling.

"Well?" he asked tauntingly. "Who's going to start it? You, Carly? Or is that your job, Deac?"

He knew he had little to fear from Carly; the man was so clumsy he would be slow in his draw.

The thin man didn't worry him, either. His face was ashen-colored, and his Adam's apple was jerking furiously.

Scared to death, was Canavan's opinion after stealing a quick look at the man. "He's not going to be any help to them, that's sure."

Canavan turned his head slightly in Deac's direction. The man in the blue shirt would be the one to watch. He was tall and rangy, and doubtless quick with his hands. He would be the one to make the first move.

THE next moment Deac confirmed that. His right arm jerked backward as he went for his gun. But Canavan was far faster. His gun was in his hand and leveling for a shot before Deac's gun muzzle cleared holster. There was a thunderous blast of gunfire that rocked the saloon, caromed off its walls. There was a slight pause, hardly more than a second or two, then a second blast. There was no more shooting after that.

When Tuck Wells dared raise his head and peer cautiously over the edge of the bar, only two men were still on their feet—Canavan, crouching a little, and the thin man. That man, white-faced, bulgy-eyed, and gulping, had thrown down his gun and he stood facing Canavan with his hands held high. Deac was sitting on the floor a pace away from the bar, hunched over, with his arms folded and pressed against his stomach, and his knees half drawn up.

Tuck caught a sharp breath and shot a quick look in Carly's direction. There was no sign of him. Tuck scurried out from behind the bar and looked down at the floor in front of it, where Carly had been standing, spun around and ran to the door. A lurching, swaying figure that was poised over the top step pitched out into space and struck the plank walk at the foot of the steps with a resounding crash.

"Put your hands down," Canavan curtly instructed the thin man. "Stay where you are, though, till I decide what I'm going to do with you."

Deliberately he turned his back on the man, gulped down his beer, and pushed the empty, foam-ringed glass back on the bar just as there came the sound of voices outside, excited and panting voices, and running, converging bootsteps. Men piled into the saloon. He didn't turn his head. He heard them pass him—those who went to Deac—and looked in that direction. Deac lay motionless on the floor on his side. Canavan turned his head the other way when someone came up to him. The sheriff.

"Still at it, huh?" Embree demanded. There were other men behind the sheriff, in the doorway and on the veranda. Canavan took notice of them, but without interest. "Still adding to the notches on your gun."

Tuck Wells came into the saloon.

"It wasn't his doing, Sheriff," the bartender said. He was a little breathless. They tried to brace him. Only he was too fast."

Canavan slapped a coin on the bar, and strode doorward. Men gave way before him, opened a path for him, and he marched out. A handful of men who were standing around Carly's body looked up when Canavan came down the steps, but he passed them with a glance, cut across the street and went into the hotel. In minutes he was back in his lamp-lit room.

He looked up when he heard footsteps on the landing. They came up to his door. Then there was a knock on it.

"Yeah?" he called.

"Canavan?"

It was a woman's voice, one that he recognized at once, that made him go swiftly to the door and throw it open. Then Molly Fisher and he were looking at each other across the threshhold.

VII

STANDING in the soft shadows there, with the hood of her cloak framing her face, Molly was the most desirable woman Johnny Canavan had ever seen. There was a becoming flush in her cheeks that deepened a bit under his hungry eyes.

"Aren't you going to ask me in?" she asked, with a quiet little smile.

He backed quickly with the door, opening it wide for her. She crossed the threshhold. When she heard the door close behind her, she turned to him, pushing back the hood and letting it hang between her shoulders. She touched her hair.

"I was afraid I'd be too late," she told him. "Afraid you'd be gone."

"I decided to stay over for another day. But how'd you know where to find me?"

"I didn't really." As he moved around her, she turned after him. "I figured that if by some remote chance you hadn't yet left Cuero, then you'd have to have some place to spend the night. That meant the hotel. There wasn't anyone downstairs at the desk. But the book on it was open, and I looked at it, found your name and your room number, and came right up."

He took his hat and gun-belt from the chair, put them on the bureau, and brought the chair forward for her. She murmured "Thank you," seated herself, and sat back with her hands in her lap and her eyes lifted to him.

"Well, Molly?" he asked when he couldn't restrain himself any longer.

His heart was thumping so wildly as he waited hopefully for her reply, he was sure she could hear it. Her answer had to be the one he wanted. She wouldn't have come to him unless she had left Reuben.

"Will you do something for me, Canavan?"

He looked at her with surprise in his eyes. If she had left Reuben for him, as he was confident she had, why couldn't she come right out with it? Then the thought came to him that while she knew how he felt about her, that that wasn't enough for her; that just reading it in his eyes wasn't enough assurance for her; that she might be waiting for him to tell her openly what he had never actually said to her, before she would feel free to tell him what he wanted to hear.

"Do you have to ask, Molly? Don't you know I'd do anything in the world for you?"

There it was. He had said it. Perhaps not the way she might have wanted it said. Still it was plain enough.

"Will you—will you come back to us?"

He swallowed hard. She hadn't left Reuben, after all. And all she wanted of him was a favor. The hurt he felt was reflected in his voice despite his efforts to conceal it from her.

"What's the idea?" he wanted to know, and his voice sounded gruff, even harsh, to his own ears.

"We want to prove to you and to everyone else that we aren't the weaklings we appear to be. We think we're quite capable of doing everything required of us. Even die if we have to. But we need someone strong, someone like you, Canavan, to get us started in the right direction."

"This your idea?"

She shook her head.

"Don't tell me it was Reuben's. I'd find it hard to believe. Specially after what happened today."

"Actually it was that Gregg woman who suggested it," she answered evenly, "and everyone approved the idea. It was decided

that Reuben would go after you and ask you to return. But at the last minute—"

"He lost his nerve, huh?"

"I was afraid you might not agree if he asked you—"

"So you offered to go in his place because you knew I wouldn't turn you down. Right?"

She made no response.

"And I thought, leastways I hoped, you'd come to me for another reason. Guess I've been hoping for something I hadn't any right to hope for."

HE WALKED to the window and stood there with his back to her.

"I don't know, Molly," he said finally. "I'd like to do it. Not because of the others, because they don't mean anything to me. But for you. I'm crazy about you. Then to be near you every day and to have to keep my distance, wanting you so much that it hurts, but not being able to do anything about it, it's asking a lot of me. An awful lot. And I don't know that I could go through with it."

"Would it be asking any more of you than it would of me?"

He turned slowly. He peered hard at her. "You mind repeating that?"

"Would it be asking any more of you than it would of me?"

"You mean you feel the same way about me?"

"Oh, yes, Canavan! I thought you knew that."

They moved at the same time. He took a step toward her and stopped again, and she arose from her chair, and started toward him with an outflung hand, only to stop, too. They stood facing each other, about a foot apart, each wanting the other, yet denying themselves what they wanted.

"You never let on, Molly."

"Couldn't you see it in my eyes? I saw it in your eyes."

"What do we do?"

"What can we do?"

"Only one thing, Molly."

"You mean go away together?"

"That's right."

"No, Canavan," she said with a shake of her head. "We can't do that. I know I can't. I'm married to Reuben. I'm the mother of his child. They both need me, one as much as the other. If I deserted them, I'd never be able to live with myself. If I went away with you, as time went on, I'd hate myself for what I had done, and I'd hate you, too, for having been a party to it. So you see . . ."

"That it's one of those things that we can't do anything about? Oh, yeah, I can see it all right. See it as plain as day."

She raised the hood again around her head, drew her cloak a little closer around her, and walked to the door.

"Good-by, Canavan."

He tried to answer but the words stuck in his throat and choked him. He heard the door close behind her, heard her light step briefly on the landing. He moved heavily to the window again and looked down into the darkened street. A buckboard was drawn up at the curb in front of the hotel. Molly came out, climbed into it, and drove off. He clapped on his hat and blew out the light. The door slammed behind him. . . .

Aggie was well-rested and eager to run, and Canavan did not hold her down once they had left Cuero. The miles vanished behind them. They overtook Molly as she was wheeling off the road onto the cut-through. She pulled up at once when she heard Canavan call her. He reined in alongside the buckboard.

"You came anyway," she said, a voice only, for whose face he could barely make out her face in the darkness. "Even though there's nothing to look forward to."

"You knew I wouldn't turn you down, didn't you?"

"I didn't dare hope too much."

"If you can stick it out, I guess I can, too. But it isn't going to be easy, Molly. You'd better make up your mind to that."

"Oh, I know it's going to be difficult," she assured him. "But I think we have the courage to go through with it. Now there's just one thing—"

"All right. I'm listening."

"Canavan, if as time goes by, you should feel that you shouldn't have returned, that the future holds nothing for you here, just get up on your horse and go. Or if you

should find that you've fallen in love with someone else. Don't come and tell me about it. I couldn't bear to hear you tell me about another woman. Just take her away with you. When I hear that you've gone, I'll understand, and I won't blame you."

HE SAID, "Look, Molly. If it's that Doreen Gregg woman you're thinking about, don't. Don't give her another thought. Y'hear? I've met others like her. Plenty of them. And I never had trouble riding away."

"Johnny—"

It was the first time she had called him that.

"Will you kiss me, please?" she asked.

She lifted her face to him. He bent over her, cupped her face in his big hands. He whispered, "Molly, Molly," felt tears course down her cheeks, and kissed her full on the mouth. She choked off a sob. Her hands came up and clung to his. When she drew them down, he moved back from her. He waited till the buckboard had pulled ahead of him. Then he rode after it.

The following morning four horsemen loped into Cuero and pulled up in front of a store whose window bore the legend "LAND OFFICE." Led by a grim-faced cattleman Rick Fleming, they trooped inside. Will Pierce, middle-aged, thin-haired and bespectacled, who was in charge of the office, looked up a little wonderingly from his desk when the four men entered.

"Fleming, Sturges, Booth and Kiley," he murmured. "Far as I've ever heard tell, they never had any use for one another. Yet here they are together. Wonder what they're up to?"

He arose and sauntered to the railing; as they came up to it. He nodded and said:

"Morning."

"Morning, Will," the four cattlemen chorused.

"Will," Fleming began, "We're here to do some filing."

"You came to the right place to do it," Pierce answered.

There was a table standing just beyond him, one side flush with the railing, and on the table were a dozen or more curled-up maps. He reached for the one nearest him, unrolled it and studied it for a moment, and, spreading it out on the railing, said, "Picked out yours right off, Rick."

Fleming bent over it.

"There," he said after a brief study of the map. "Right there, Will." With a broken-nailed finger he traced a line on it. "I'm filing on that section."

"I'm afraid not, Rick," Pierce said.

Fleming raised his eyes. "Huh? What d'you mean?"

"See the way it's been outlined in black ink? That means it's been filed on already. Matter of fact, it was filed on just this morning."

"Yeah? And who filed on it?"

"Feller named Wiggens."

"Wiggens?" Fleming repeated. "Never heard of anybody named Wiggens 'round these parts before. You sure you got the name right?"

"I'm sure, Rick."

"But, damnation, Will, that's my land!" Fleming sputtered, his face suddenly flaming. "I've been grazing my stock on it for years. Last year I even hired a couple of extra hands to help clear it."

"Then why didn't you file on it and make it yours legal?" Pierce asked bluntly.

"You mean in spite of everything I've done, all the dinero I've put out to make that section usable, I don't have any claim to it?"

"That's the general idea, Rick."

Sturges crowded up alongside Fleming and said, "Will—"

Pierce shifted his eyes to him.

"Will you know that section next to my property? Section Eighteen, I think it is."

"Uh-huh."

"You going to tell me that's been filed on, too?"

"That's right," Pierce replied calmly. "It was filed on this morning same's Rick's was."

Sturges' eyes were burning.

"And who did you say filed on it?"

"I didn't say. But I'll tell you. Feller named Fisher."

"That's my land!" Sturges said flatly. "And nobody's gonna take it from me."

"It's Fisher's now, according to law,"

Pierce told him evenly. "You try and take it back from him, and you'll find yourself with a tough United States marshal to answer to."

Fleming stalked out. Sturges gave Pierce a hard look, and stamped out, too. Pierce turned his gaze on Booth and Kiley, and said: "If you fellers are here to file on land adjoining your spreads, you're out of luck. It's been filed on already." Then Pierce lost his temper. "Damn it! Ever since the homestead filing law came into being, I've been talking my fool head off, begging you fellers to file on your grazing lands. But did any of you pay any attention to me or do what I was telling you? Nope! Not a damned one of you. And now that you find yourselves right smack up the creek, you want to take it out on me. I get so cussed mad, I—I could spit!"

FLEMING, feeling badly in need of a drink, already was halfway to it. He topped the steps of the saloon veranda and peered into the place. When he spied Sturges who had beat him to it and now was standing alone at the bar, toying with a half-drained whisky glass, he sauntered inside, exchanged nods with Tuck Wells, and halted at Sturges' side. When his rancher neighbor lifted his eyes, Fleming asked:

"You see Nye?"

"Yeah, sure, I saw him."

"And?"

Sturges shook his head.

"You mean he won't go in on this with us?"

"Only one he wants is Canavan, and he's going to get him, too!"

"Wish he was going after Canavan now," Fleming said.

"You and me both. It would sure make things a lot easier for us. Without Canavan those damn' nesters wouldn't stand a chance, once we go after 'em. How'd you make out? See everybody you was supposed to see?"

"Yep," Fleming replied. "They're with us, all right. Just waiting for us to say when."

"Remember they're all small outfits, Sturges. All told I figure we can count on about twenty men."

"Twenty, huh?" Sturges repeated. "Add six, including me, from my outfit, Booth and Kiley, and we'll have twenty-eight. What about your hands?"

"With Deac and Carly gone, I've only got two left now," Fleming said sadly.

"All right. Bring them along."

"Can't, Sturges. Dave Wiltse has been acting up of late, so I won't ask anything of him. And Tex Anders got himself banged up this afternoon. His horse fell and threw him and rolled over on him."

"Then all told, counting you, we'll have twenty-nine."

"There are only how many nesters?" Fleming asked. "Six? Fisher makes seven."

"And Canavan?"

"Eight."

"Twenty-nine against eight," Fleming said. "Almost four of us to every one of them."

A man came up on the veranda, poked his head into the saloon, spotted Sturges, and strode down the bar to his side.

"Yeah, Waco?" Sturges asked. "Want to see me?"

"For a minute, Boss." The puncher glanced at Fleming.

Sturges said, "It's all right. You don't have to worry any about what you say in front of him."

"Boss, suppose the records Will Pierce keeps in his place were to—well, just up and disappear? Where would those mangy nesters stand without the records to back up their claims?"

"Why, damn it all Waco!" Sturges began excitedly. When Fleming hissed at him, "Sh-h—keep your voice down." Sturges gave him a hard look. But his voice was low and guarded when he said, "Waco, you've really come up with something. If those records were to—well, like you said, just up and disappear, those critters wouldn't have a leg to stand on. We could march right in to Pierce and file on those lands for ourselves and nobody could stop us."

"That's the idea," Waco applauded. "Boss, I've been planning to hit you up for more dinero. If those records disappear, do I get it?"

"Tell you what, Waco," Sturges said,

"You bring them to me, and instead of the sixty a month you're pulling down now, you'll start drawing a foreman's pay. That's eighty and found every month. How's that sound to you?"

Waco grinned broadly. "Nice, awfully nice," he said. "Like music to my ears."

WACO'S idea to steal the Land Office records had, however, come to him a little belatedly. Canavan, anticipating such an attempt on the part of the cattlemen, had decided earlier that the records would be safer in his keeping than in Will Pierce's. And he was even now planning to do something about it. Having circled the darkened town and come up upon the Land Office from the rear, he had reached the back yard. Just as he was nearing the building that housed the office, he heard something in one of the alleys that flanked it. He flattened against the building, seeking the screening safety of the shadows that it cast. A man's figure moved stealthily around a corner of the building and, hugging the back wall, headed for the door.

Son-uva-gun, Canavan thought. After the same thing I came for, I'll bet. Good thing I got here before he did."

Fortunately for Canavan, Waco had no reason to suspect that someone else might be after the records, too. So he sidled up to the door without so much as a glance about the yard. There was an almost protesting squeak from the door as the lock yielded to whatever it was that Waco used to force the door which creaked back on its hinges. Waco glided over the threshold and disappeared. Canavan, hand on his gun-butt, debated with himself, and finally agreed that he had no alternative but to wait for Waco to emerge.

He thought, no sense in me going in there, too. I'll just let this feller do the looking and find what he's after, and when he comes out, I'll jump him and take it away from him.

Long minutes passed. Finally, when his impatience got too much for him, Canavan inched up to the half-opened door and stole a look inside. He spotted a tiny flicker of light burning against the darkness. The light sputtered and suddenly went out, and he heard Waco curse. He heard drawers and cabinet doors being opened and closed, heard warped floor boards creak underfoot as Waco moved about in his search. When Waco's bootsteps turned doorward again, Canavan beat a hasty rerteat. He flattened out against the building as before, and waited. Presently Waco came out, closed the door and stood for a moment in front of it. When he finally trudged off, Canavan was satisfied that the man had failed to find the records he had sought. He gloated inwardly as he watched Waco—not knowing who he was—round the building and disappear.

Suddenly, though, his gloating stopped. Suppose that Pierce, aware or at least suspicious that the cattlemen might seek to steal his records, had taken them home with him, feeling that they would be safer there? Would the man who had broken into the office and emerged empty-handed press his quest for them, follow Pierce to his home and try to force him to surrender them? The cattlemen were desperate enough to try anything.

Canavan darted around the building, wheeled into the alley and ran up its sloping length to the entrance. The darkened street was deserted. Slowly, trying to effect a casualness about his movements in case any one was watching, he stepped out onto the plank walk and sauntered upstreet. He glimpsed a man turning into the doorway of a two-story home some distance up the street, promptly quickened his pace, and broke into a trot when he heard the door close behind the man. When he reached the building, he tried the door. It was locked. He bolted around the building and dashed down the alley that ran alongside, skidded around the rear of the building. The back door was unlocked, and the next moment he was inside the home.

IT WAS dark on the lower floor, and musty-smelling, too. There was a stairway ahead of him; beyond it was the locked street door. He tiptoed to the stairway and looked up. A lamp with a turned-down wick burning in it cast a small circle of light on the landing, leaving the stairway in shadow. With his hand on his gun, Canavan mounted the stairs and climbed them.

There was a single door on the upper floor, out of sight from the stairway and from anyone coming up. Thin rays of lamplight seeped out underneath the door and played over the threshold. Canavan crossed the landing on tiptoe. But as he neared the door, he heard a bolt grate, locking it. He put his ear to the panels.

"What—what's the meaning of this?" demanded a voice he recognized at once as Will Pierce's. "Who are you and what do you want here? And what's the idea of the neckerchief over your face and that gun you're pointing at me?"

"I want your record book, Pierce," Canavan heard a man say in a flat, unfamiliar voice.

"My record book?" Pierce echoed.

"That's right. Or whatever it is you list things in."

"My records happen to be the property of the United States Government," Pierce said, and he sounded indignant.

"I still want it, so trot it out."

"You can't have it."

"This gun says I can, Pierce. And if I have to kill you to get it, then I'll kill you. Now don't tell me that book means more to you than your life?"

"You can't have it," Pierce repeated.

There was sudden movement behind the locked door, sudden sounds of scuffling. A chair was overturned, then the scuffling appeared to be over.

"I thought there was something familiar about you," Canavan heard Pierce say and he sounded out of breath. "And now that I've had a look at your face, I know you. You're one of Sturges' crew, aren't you? It doesn't matter though, who you work for, or what your name is. A marshal will be able to recognize you from the description I can give him and—"

There was a sudden roar of gunfire—two, three, four quick shots—a choked off cry, and the thud of a toppling body striking the floor. The bolt was drawn back, the door was yanked open, and a man burst out. A yellow and green neckerchief covered the lower part of his face. Canavan, whipping out his gun, had backed away from the door and was standing against the far wall a step away from the stairs. Waco glimpsed him, stared as he faltered to an uncertain stop, suddenly flung a shot at him and as Canavan ducked, Waco leaped across the landing. As he flashed by, Canavan thrust out his foot, tripping him. Waco cried out, made a frantic, desperate grab for the banister rail, missed it, and hurtled downward. His plummeting body struck hard about midway down the stairs, arched and flipped over and rolled down the rest of the way, slipped limply off the bottom step and lay still in the dust that boiled up around him from the lower floor. Holstering his gun, Canavan ran into Pierce's bedroom.

THE gunfire that shattered the stillness of the night brought Embree and Giffy out of the sheriff's office on the run. Sturges, cutting across the street from the saloon, reached the door to Pierce's home ahead of them. He was trying it, cursing because it refused to open, when the panting sheriff ran up, pushed him aside and put his shoulder to the door. It burst open, and the impetus of Embree's shoulder drive and lunge carried him stumblingly into the hallway to within a step of Waco's hunch-over body.

Giffy wheezed and asked, "Who's that laying there?"

"Go get a lantern so we can see," Embree ordered.

Giffy trudged out. The sheriff thrust out his arms, barring the way to Sturges and a handful of townsmen who had just run up to the scene and more trying to crowd into the narrow hallway. Disregarding their grumblings, Embree forced them to back out.

Giffy, with a lighted lantern swinging from his hand, and Tuck Wells, with his long apron flapping around his ankles, came across the street from the saloon. The bulky deputy, with Wells following at his heels, shouldered through the crowd, and stepped into the hall. Embree took the lantern from Giffy and, holding it over Waco, said:

"All right, Giffy. Take that thing off his face."

Giffy grunted, knelt down, lifted the neckerchief and peered under it.

Looking up at Embree, he growled, "It's Waco."

Wells, standing a little behind the two lawmen, turned toward the door and called:

"Hey, Sturges! It's your man, Waco."

Embree glowered at him over his shoulder.

"How'd you get in here?" he demanded. "Thought I said everybody was to wait outside?"

"That happens to be my lantern you're holding there," Tuck answered evenly.

Sturges crowded in between Giffy and Embree and stared down at the body that lay at their feet.

"He's dead," Giffy said, without looking up. "Neck's busted. Must of taken a header off the stairs."

The cattlemen's mouth opened and his jaw hung slack a little. Embree gave him a head-tilted look.

"I don't suppose you'd know what Waco was doing here, would you, Mr. Sturges?" he asked, and his voice was heavy with sarcasm. "Huh?"

"I have men working for me, full grown men too, not kids," Sturges flung back at the sheriff. "When their day's work is done, what they do with themselves between then and the next morning is their business."

The sheriff was a little taken aback by Sturges' angry outburst.

"No call for you to get sore about it," he said in a milder tone. "I was only asking, you know."

"I didn't like the way you asked," Sturges retorted.

"Here," Embree said, and passed the lantern back to Giffy.

He stepped around Waco's body and trudged heavily up the stairs. Near the top, he stopped, bent down and picked up something, and went on. He stopped again on the landing and looked at the wall, then disappeared from view. They heard him moving about on the upper floor; after a couple of minutes he reappeared and came down the stairs. He was holding a gun in his hand.

"Thanks for letting us use your lantern, Tuck," he said to the bartender. "Soon's we're finished with it, Giffy'll return it to you."

WELLS looked disappointed. However, he made no comment, simply stalked to the door. When Embree motioned, Giffy followed him, closed the door after him, and backed against it. The sheriff held up the gun so that Sturges could see it. He pointed with a thick, stubby fingers to four pin-scratched letters in the heel plate.

"W-a-c-o. Spells Waco, right? Then there's no argument about who this gun belonged to."

There was no response from Sturges.

"I found Will Pierce laying upstairs," Embree continued. "Shot dead. Got four slugs in him. Then I found a fifth slug in the wall on the landing. There's just one bullet left in Waco's gun. Since it's a sixgun, I don't think there can be any question about where those five shots came from." He tapped the gun butt significantly. "Now what I'd kind of like to know from you is, what was Waco after, did you send him after it, or did he get the idea to get it all by himself and go off without telling you anything about it?"

Sturges hesitated. "He was after Pierce's record book," he said.

"That's what I figured," Embree said drily. "Only I wanted to hear it from you."

"But the idea to go after it was his," Sturges added. "All his, too."

"But since you knew what he was going after," the sheriff pointed out, "and since you stood to profit by it if he got the book away from Pierce, that makes you as guilty of what he did as he was. You knew Pierce was a stubborn old coot, that he wouldn't give up anything just because Waco was holding a gun on him. Chances are the old buzzard dared Waco to shoot. That's the kind he was. You didn't tell Waco to try to bluff Pierce into handing over the book, and if that didn't work, to let it go rather than make yourself a party to a murder, did you? You didn't say anything. You let him go ahead. If Waco had to kill Pierce, that would be too bad for Pierce. Y'know, Sturges, I always thought you were a pretty smart feller. You are not at all. D'you know what's going to happen now?"

"A Gover'ment man has been killed," Giffy said from where he was standing, "and it's up to us to get word of it right away to the nearest marshal."

"Right," the sheriff said. "And we haven't

any alternative about it either. We've got to do it. And when a marshal hits town and starts poking his nose into things, you're going to be in trouble."

"Yeah?" Sturges flung at him defiantly.

"Yeah. Because we won't do anything to cover up for you."

"I think you will, Embree." Sturges said quietly. "Fact is, I know you will. And you want to know why? Because I've got witnesses who'll swear you offered to cover up for us when we make our sweep against the nesters. So if you don't want to get yourself in trouble, you'd better fix up a story you can tell that marshal when he hits Cuero that'll satisfy him and send him on his way again. But as far as I'm concerned, I'm in the clear because I didn't know a damned thing about what Waco was up to. And you're going to back me up on that."

VIII

BECAUSE he was curious to know how Will Pierce's murder would be explained away, Canavan rode to town early the next day. If anyone could tell him what he wanted to know, it would be Tuck Wells. Bartenders were usually the best informed individuals in any town, and Wells, he had already discovered, was no exception.

Tuck didn't fail him now.

"You missed some excitement 'round here last night," the bartender told Canavan.

"That so?" Long ago, Johnny Canavan had learned that if he was casual, rather than eager, more infromation would be forthcoming.

"Yep. Will Pierce, the old feller that run the Gov'ment Land Office was killed."

"You don't say!"

"Some damned fool, a Sturges rider named Waco got it into his head that Pierce had a whole bundle of Gover'ment dinero stashed away up at his house. This Waco tried to scare Pierce into handing it over, and when Pierce wouldn't do it, Waco just about blasted him apart."

"I'll be damned!"

"But things have a funny way of evening themselves up. Y'know?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, busting out of Pierce's place after killing him, Waco took a header off the stairs, and broke his fool neck."

"Reckon he got what he was coming to him then. Did he get the dinero he was after?"

"Nope," Wells replied. Whoever gave him the idea that Pierce had any hid away sure gave him a wrong steer. Too bad about Pierce though. I never got to know him too well, being that he never came in here. But folks around who got friendly with him liked him, say he was all right."

"Uh-huh."

"Anyway, that's what happened around here last night."

On his way back to the Fisher home, Canavan was about a mile from town when he heard hoofbeats behind him. He twisted around and looked back. He spotted an oncoming horseman, but the distance between them was too great to permit recognition. He looked back a couple of times, until finally, he did recognize the approaching horseman. It was the sheriff. Slowing Aggie Canavan permitted Embree to overtake him. The lawman came drumming up alongside, and promptly slowed his mount to match Aggie's trot.

"I was going out to the Fisher place," Embree began. "To see you."

"Me?" Canavan said in surprise. "What about?"

He brought Aggie to a full stop. The sheriff pulled up, too. Canavan turned to him.

"What'd you want to see me about?" Canavan repeated.

"Thought you might want to know that the cattlemen are getting together to make a sweep against the nesters."

"So Nye's finally set to make his big play, huh?"

"Nye isn't in on this."

Canavan grinned a little.

"Won't he feel slighted when he hears about it? How come he wasn't invited to take a hand?"

"He was," the sheriff said evenly. "Only he turned it down."

"Well, good for him!"

"He turned it down," Embree continued,

"because the nesters don't mean anything to him. When he's set to go, it'll be after you."

"I see," Canavan said. "Then who—?"

"It's Sturges. He and Fleming are rounding up a bunch of men, and when they're ready, the word will go out and they'll all start riding."

"Got any idea when that might be?"

"It's supposed to be set for some time tomorrow night."

CANAVAN said thoughtfully, "Probably figure to hit us when they expect we'll be asleep. Thanks for letting us know, Embree."

They sat in silence then, for a long, rather awkward moment—that is, for the sheriff. When the silence and Canavan's steady gaze began to make the lawman feel uncomfortable, he flushed a bit.

"What are you looking at me like that for?"

"I don't get it, Embree. I didn't think you had any more use for the nesters than the cattlemen have. So how come this all of a sudden change in you?"

Embree's face suddenly flamed, and he sputtered:

"If you don't want to take this the way I'm giving it to you—"

"You have a falling out or something with the cattlemen? Is this your way of getting back at 'em?"

"I didn't have any falling out with anybody," the sheriff said flatly, though still red-faced.

"All right," Canavan said. "If you say you didn't, that's good enough for me."

The crimson began to fade out of Embree's face.

"Gotta get back to town," he said.

"Thanks again," said Canavan.

"Yeah, sure," the sheriff said. "If your nesters hope to have any peace around here, you'd better let them know that Sturges is the man who's standing in the way of it. That ought to help them make up their minds to what they've got to do. Unless, of course,"—and his eyes suddenly seemed to smile—"you do it for 'em. It wouldn't mean much to you, just another notch on your gun butt. But think what it would mean to them! But that's for you to decide, Canavan . . . Well, so long."

"So long, Embree."

Canavan watched the sheriff ride away, followed him with narrowed eyes till he was out of sight.

The son-uva-gun! he thought. The gall of him! Finally worked up enough courage to come out with it. I knew all along he didn't come out here to warn us about the sweep because he was concerned about the nesters. That was just a cover-up for what he really wants, which is to have Sturges killed off. And I know damned well he don't want that just because Sturges has been stirring up feeling against the nesters. It's for some other reason, something personal between him and Sturges. And if he can get us to get rid of Sturges for him, he'll be the smart one. Well, we'll have to see about that. But what's got me wondering is what could have happened that soured him on Sturges, and if it had anything to do with that Pierce killing?

It was at just about the time he was wheeling into the cut-through that led to the Fisher homestead, that the sheriff, returned to Cuero, was dismounting in front of his office.

Giffy was sitting at the desk when the door opened and Embree came striding in.

"How'd you make out?" Giffy asked.

Embree thumbed his hat up from his forehead. "I think I made out all right."

"Y'mean he's going to go after Sturges himself?"

"Yeah, I kinda think he will, Giff."

"Good," Giffy said, nodding. "Sturges is slower'n molasses when it comes to gun play, Canavan ought to be able to beat him to the draw a dozen ways from Sunday. . . ."

FOLLOWING Canavan's instructions a property line was begun by the homesteaders. But Canavan knew a fence wouldn't last long; Sturges' crew would see to that. So he decided on a rock barrier that started at the cut-through and, passing behind Fisher's barn, stretched away northward.

The women in the nester party insisted upon participating in the project. It was a back-breaking task, and one that was just as

toll-exacting on fingers and fingernails. But it was done with such surprising willingness that Canavan couldn't help but admire the homesteaders' spirit. His eyes lingered the longest on Molly who toiled manfully with the others. Once when she came trudging by, red-faced from her exertions and with her cheeks dirt-smudged, she stopped, smiled and remarked:

"Even young Johnny's doing his share. He hunts up the rocks and leads us to them."

"He's all right," declared Canavan.

"I told you, didn't I, that what we needed most was someone to lead us, to tell us what to do, and that we'd do it willingly?"

Only Doreen Gregg had declined to join the others in the undertaking. She was standing near her wagon, watching the barrier continue to grow when Canavan, striding by, stopped and looked around at her.

"In case you're wondering why I've declined to help with the building of that wall," she said, "I'm planning to leave here."

"That so? Heading for California like you said, huh?"

"I'm going to find a place for myself in town."

"I see."

"I'll probably be staying at the hotel for a time," she went on. "When you're in town—"

"Thanks. But when I go to town, usually I don't have time for visiting."

"If I were someone else, you'd find time, though, wouldn't you?" she chided him.

"Someone else like who?" he pressed her.

She didn't answer. He said, with irritation:

"I don't like people who hint at things because they haven't got the guts to come right out with them."

"All right," she said. "If I were Molly Fisher, you'd find time for me, wouldn't you?"

"So that's it!"

"Yes," she said calmly. "I know whose friend you are, and I know you're not Reuben's, because he doesn't like you. And I think I know why. Because he suspects there's something between you and his wife."

His lips came together and thinned.

"And there is, isn't there?" She suddenly laughed; it was a little too gay and too taunting, and his eyes glinted. "Oh, that look in your eyes! If I were a man, you'd kill me for that, wouldn't you? Isn't that what you're known for, being a killer?"

He walked away from her. She ran after him.

"Canavan—please!"

He stopped and she came running up to him, lifted her face to him.

"I'm sorry," she breathed. "Honestly and terribly sorry. I shouldn't have said what I did."

"It's all right."

"Then you forgive me?" she asked eagerly, her hands on his arms. "Then we'll still be friends?"

"Another kind of people I haven't any use for are those who say things out of pure meanness, and when the damage is done, make a big show of being sorry. You're one of those people, Doreen."

She stepped back from him.

"Indeed!" she said. "Then I'm not sorry at all."

"That's what I figured."

Her eyes were burning. "I don't like you, Canavan," she said angrily.

"That's all right," he replied. "I don't like you either. So we're even."

She glowered and he laughed at her, and suddenly enraged she flared at him:

"You—you swine!"

She slapped him. He had seen the slap coming and could easily have avoided it, but he didn't; took it, instead, without moving. But then his own hand flashed upward and he slapped her stingingly, left the red imprint of his hand on her cheek. Open-mouthed she stared at him, lifted her hand mechanically to her cheek.

"Well?" he taunted. "Want to go 'round again? You can go first if you want to."

DOREEN gasped, spun around and ran back to her wagon. Her horses were tied to the rear wheel. She untied them and led them forward, backed them into the traces and hitched them up. Then, raising her skirts, she climbed up to the high seat. She unwound the reins from around the hand brake, released it, flicked the loose ends

of the reins over the horses' heads. They strained against the traces and the wagon lurched a little; she lashed the horses and they strained again. This time the big wheels turned, bit into the hard-packed ground, and the wagon moved, pulled out of line. Doreen's crimsoned face was a reflection of fury. She drove straight at Canavan. As the lumbering wagon neared him, he stepped back. When it came abreast of him, Doreen leaned down from the driver's seat and lashed at him with the reins, screamed at him when he avoided them. Men and women alike, even young Johnny Fisher, looked in the direction of the trundling wagon as it rolled by, heading for the open road beyond the cut-through.

Reuben Fisher, mopping his sweaty, grimy face with a bandanna, trudged up to Canavan.

"What happened?" he asked. "And where's Doreen going?"

"She's above lending a hand like the other women are doing," Canavan replied. "So she's taken herself off to town."

Fisher looked surprised. "But she'll be back, won't she?"

"No, I don't think she will."

"But what is she going to do in town?"

"Stay there. At least, for the time being. Till she decides to go elsewhere. There's nothing out here for her. You folks can't give her what she wants, what she's looking for."

"But we're her friends," the homesteader protested. "To go off like that, without a good-by or even a word of explanation—"

"Maybe it was better that way. Easier all around, for her, you people."

Fisher looked at him blankly. But he did not ask the question that Canavan expected. Instead he blurted:

"Well, whatever it is she wants, does she think she'll find it among strangers?"

"I think she stands a far better chance there than she does here," Canavan answered, and walked off.

He could feel Fisher's eyes following him, and he knew that the homesteader did not understand. But he had had enough of Doreen Gregg, and he had no desire to discuss her, least of all with Reuben Fisher.

STANDING in the open doorway of the sheriff's office, Giffy watched night come on, saw the stores darken and lose their identity in the veiling darkness, saw the street begin to empty as the townspeople made their way homeward. Giffy watched it with detached interest for it meant little to him other than that bedtime was getting closer. He had had his supper and now he was waiting for Embree to return from his.

Giffy's attention was attracted by the sound of hoofs. He poked his head out. A horseman, shadowy and unrecognizable in the night light, came into view. Giffy's eyes held on him as he came loping down the street. He watched the man ride up to the saloon and dismount, saw him stand idly on the walk for a moment or two, then climb the steps to the veranda. Topping the steps, he halted again, within the lights that came from the saloon and which played over the veranda. Giffy recognized him then. It was Canavan.

Bet he's come to get Sturges, Giffy thought, and excitment began to build in him. "Gee, I wish Embree would get back! Then I could go see it happen."

As he watched, Canavan stepped into the saloon.

But there was no sign yet of the sheriff, and Giffy began to get impatient and fidgety. Nervousness brought on by his steadily mounting excitement made him bite his lip. But after a couple of tense minutes passed uneventfuly, he began to wonder. Why hadn't something happened? Sturges was a nightly visitor to Cuero, so it couldn't be that he wasn't there. The silence and the delay had to be due to something else.

Canavan, he told himself, was simply waiting for the right moment to make his move. The saloon was probably crowded, and Giffy, picturing it to himself, envisioned the bar thronged with noisy, clamorous men standing in front of it, with Sturges among them, unaware of Canavan's presence and his reason for being there, surrounded by other cattlemen and shut off by them from Canavan's view. He could mentally see Canavan, too, standing off to one side, staying his hand till some of the customers had departed. The majority were cattlemen, and

naturally they would spring to Sturges' defense if Canavan sought to jump him while they were there. So it was reasonable to assume that Canavan was merely biding his time, waiting for the crowd to thin out.

SUDDENLY, with a let-down feeling, Giffy noticed that there weren't any horses tied up in front of the saloon. Ranging his gaze about a little wildly, he saw that there weren't any horses tied up at any of the other rails along the street. Could it be, he asked himself, that for the first time in a long, long time, probably a span of years, that Sturges had failed to make his nightly visit to Cuero? Sturges had simply been delayed, he told himself, and he would show up eventually.

Reassured, Giffy was able to bridle his impatience. It was just as well that Sturges was late. That would give Embree even more time to have his supper and return to the office. Then another disturbing thought came to Giffy. Giffy hoped Canavan wouldn't tire of waiting for Sturges to appear and decide to put off his mission for another time.

Suddenly there was a startling silence shattering, carrying echo of gunfire from somewhere off in the dark distance beyond the town. Instantly Giffy was out of the doorway and standing tensely in the middle of the walk and staring upstreet with wide eyes. He shot a worried look at the saloon, saw a tall figure he knew at once was Canavan come rushing out, saw him scurry down the steps and out to the curb, saw him leap up on his horse's back, and dash off. Disappointed at this turn of events, Giffy did not notice the man who came hurrying across the street until he stepped up on the walk and, halting at Giffy's side, wheezed:

"They tricked me." Giffy's head jerked around and he stared blankly at Embree. "They lied to me. They told me it was going to be tomorrow night."

He turned away and strode into the office. Giffy wheeled around after him and followed him inside. The door slammed and a bolt rasped as it was shoved through the brackets. Standing in the connecting doorway, Embree looked at Giffy and said:

"I still don't know what to do about notifying a marshal. Whether we ought to do it or hold off awhile."

"We're supposed to do it right off, aren't we?"

"Yeah. But suppose something comes up and we don't get around to it as soon as we'd like to?"

"Then we hold off till we're free to do it."

"Then I think that's what we'll do. Hold off awhile."

The light in the office went out. The building that housed the office melted back, faded away into the surrounding and deepening darkness.

IX

THE Sturges-Fleming sweep against the intruding homesteaders was over, and the cattlemen had won an unchallenged victory. The homesteaders, taken completely by surprise, had offered no resistance. Now they stood bunched together in a tight little group with mounted men, brandishing guns, forming a circle around them. There was concern in the men's faces, and fright in the women's and children's, and grimness in the faces of their captors. Four of the raiders lay dead despite the fact that not a single homesteader shot had been fired at the invaders.

Thundering across the darkened range at the Fisher place because it was known that the homesteaders had taken refuge there, their hard riding surge had carried them headlong into the rock barrier that suddenly loomed up in front of them. It was too late for the massed horsemen to pull up or swerve away from it. Those directly behind the lead rank piled into it, drove into the rocks. Men were thrown, catapulted over their horses' heads as the panic-stricken animals crashed into the barrier and fell brokenly. Stunned by the force with which they were hurled from their saddles, and unable to twist away from the threshing legs and the lashing hooves of the injured horses, four men's lives were snuffed out. Wild, aimless and uncalled-for shooting flared for a moment when a couple of horsemen panicked and fired at imaginary targets, adding to the confusion. More fatalities might have resulted if the last band of horsemen had followed

the lead of those ahead. Fortunately they had held back a little, so were able to pull up sharply and swerve away. Swinging northward and following the barrier, they wheeled around the last rock that the homesteaders had rolled into position in the line, and came thundering down upon the drawn-up wagons at a full gallop just as the homesteaders were climbing down from them. It was a fairly simple matter for the dozen or so horsemen to cow their victims into submission and herd them together.

The cries of the injured lifted above all other sounds and noises. Wagon lanterns were hurriedly commandeered and lighted. In minutes yellowish light was flooding the area on the far side of the barrier where searchers were picking their way gingerly through the tangle of men's and horses' bodies. The dead were left untouched. The injured horses were promptly despatched by gunfire, to save them from further suffering. The injured men were carried away and laid in the lush grass beyond the spot. Those who could manage by themselves limped about, sought out men from their own crews, climbed up behind them, and were taken away so their injuries could be treated. Those who had suffered more serious hurts were hoisted in front of horsemen who took them to town for professional surgical help.

Fleming, who had supervised the removal of the injured men, rode around the barrier and pulled up in front of the house. He spied Sturges standing near the open door, twisting a handful of twigs into a faggot. Fleming dismounted, and peered into the house.

"The Fishers are down there," Sturges told him, nodding in the direction of the wagons. "How bad did we get it, piling into that wall?"

"Bad," Fleming replied. "We lost four men and six horses. Couple of men got themselves pretty well banged up."

Sturges touched a lighted match to the faggot, and tossed the sputtering firebrand into the house. Another faggot was thrown inside, then a third. The flimsy structure caught fire. Through the open door they could see flames whipping about, leaping across the floor, swarming over the place in waves. Suddenly there was a strange, crackling sound, and tongues of flame burst through the roof. Showers of sparks leaped upward from it to bomb the night sky, and the men responsible hastily retreated. Fleming glimpsed his horse trotting toward the barn. Soon flames broke through the walls, and the two men backed off still farther.

"What are we going do with these nesters?" Fleming asked.

"What d'you think we're going to do with them?" Sturges demanded. "Think we came after them just to chase them away?"

FLEMING gave him a quick, searching look.

"You mean we're going to kill them?"

Sturges didn't answer.

"The women and children, too?"

"If we let a single nester, man, woman or kid get away," Sturges said bluntly, "we'll be looping a rope around our own necks. Just let one of 'em stay alive and get to a marshal and tell what happened to the rest of 'em, and we'll swing for it. But if we kill them all off, there won't be any witnesses to testify against us."

Fleming looked troubled.

"Thought we were only going after the men?"

"I don't know where you got that idea," Sturges replied. "I know damned well you didn't get it from me. When we got together, it was to get rid of the nesters, and there wasn't anything said about it being just the men. Far as I'm concerned, a nester is a nester, whether a man, woman or a kid. And when we talked about it, you were so het up about getting rid of the nesters, I took it for granted you felt the same way about them that I did. But now all of a sudden, you're singing a different tune."

"All I'm saying is that I don't like the idea of butchering a lot of women and kids."

"Then you'd better get to like it," Sturges retorted. "Want to tell you something, Fleming. "Whether you like the idea or you don't, every nester in that bunch will be dead before this night is over. If you haven't got the belly to go through with what you helped start, you can pull out. But whether you stay or you pull out, you're in

this as I am. If anything ever comes up, and I get grabbed by a marshal, whatever they do to me, they'll do to you, too. Because I'll tell the law you had just as much to do with this as I did."

He started away. Fleming overtook him, said unhappily:

"If they'd put up a fight and we killed them all, that would have been different."

"I know."

"No sign of that troublemaker, Canavan, huh?"

"No."

"Then even if we kill off every one of the nesters," Fleming said, "we still won't be any better off than we were before tonight. We'll still have Canavan to deal with."

"Maybe, maybe, not," Sturges said. "I know Coley Nye, I think we can count on him taking care of Canavan for us."

"But suppose he doesn't?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Fleming!"

"I know, but I'd still like to know what you've got in mind, just in case."

"Suppose," Sturges said, "that instead of borrowing trouble when we don't know there's going to be any, that we do what we have to do now, then wait and see what happens afterward?"

"Still think Embree will cover up for us for tonight?"

"I know damned well he will!"

"I wish I could be as sure of that as you are."

"I'm telling you he will," Sturges insisted, "because he knows what's good for him."

Despite that strong assurances, Fleming's expression showed that he wasn't as fully satisfied with things as Sturges seemed to think he should be.

As they neared the wagons, Fleming said:

"Hope you don't aim to do it here."

"No, 'course not," Sturges answered. "Too close to town. We'll take them out on the range a couple of miles and find a place. If there was a good, deep ravine—"

"What's the matter with the one on that used to be on Old Man Sleiger's place? Nobody lives there now."

"Hey, that's right, Fleming! That'd be just the place for it. We'll do the right thing by them, though. We won't just dump 'em into the ravine and leave them to rot. We'll make a regular grave out of it."

THEY came up to the mounted men, and the two nearest them backed their horses to permit Sturges to enter the circle.

"All right, you people," he said to the homesteaders. "Get hitched up and climb up into your wagons." He turned to Fleming. "You know where the place is, don't you? Then suppose you get your horse and lead the way? The boys and me will follow along behind the wagon."

Fleming hesitated for a moment. Then with a shake of his head, he squeezed through between two wagons. Emerging on the other side of the train, he stopped again and looked around. There was no sign of his horse. He could hear the stamp of a horse's hoof in the darkened barn just a dozen steps away, and he stalked inside. It was so gloomily dark in there it took him a minute or so to accustom his eyes to the darkness. Then he made out the form of a horse standing in one of the low partitioned stalls at the far end.

"All right, Brownie," he said crossly. "Come out of there and let's get going."

The horse stamped again, but did not back out of the stall. Frowning, Fleming started toward him. A shadowy figure rose up out of the darkness and wheeled after him, and a gun-butt came thudding down on the cattleman's head with a sickening thump. He gasped painfully and sagged at the knees. As he was about to crumple, he was caught from behind. His gun was yanked out of holster, and he was shoved into a vacant stall opposite the occupied one. He fell face downward. Swiftly the shadowy figure backed away, and disappeared into the cloaking darkness.

"Hey, Fleming!" called Sturges' voice. "What d'you say?"

There was a brief silence. Sturges appeared in the doorway and poked his head inside.

"How about it, Fleming?" he called.

The horse pawed the floor, scraped it with his hoof. Sturges took a couple of sauntering steps into the barn, and said:

"Aw, come on, will you, Fleming? We want to put the torch to this barn same's we did to the house, and you're holding us up."

He turned his head when he thought he heard movement somewhere behind him. It was too late. The hard, uncompromising muzzle of a gun collided with his spine, jarring him and making him stiffen. A voice hissed in his ear:

"Just one little peep out of you, Sturges, and I'll blow you apart."

The rancher gulped and swallowed hard. There was no need for him to wonder about the identity of the man who was holding the gun on him. It had to be Canavan, and he knew it was. A sickishness crept over him. He felt weak in the knees. He winced when the muzzle dug deeper into him. His gun was jerked out of his holster, and his captor hissed at him again.

"Now listen to me, Sturges, and listen good. You're going to walk to the door and you're going to tell those miserable, mangy-looking critters waiting for you outside that this is as far as you're going to go with the nesters tonight. Tell them you and Fleming have talked it over and you've decided you've thrown enough of a scare into the nesters, and you're satisfied for now. Tell them to pick up the dead and head for home and that you'll be along a little later on. Got that?"

Canavan jabbed his gun viciously into Sturges' back.

"I—I'll tell them," Sturges choked.

"See that you do," Canavan gritted. He prodded the man with his gun, pushed him when he seemed hesitant, and dogging the cattleman's steps, followed him to the door.

"Make it sound natural," he whispered over Sturges' shoulder. "And just because I haven't mentioned it up to now, don't get any ideas and try anything. Because if you do, you won't get a chance to wish you hadn't."

CANAVAN stopped Sturges just inside the middle of the barn doorway with the deep darkness from within the barn backgrounding Sturges and shielding Canavan himself. But the line-up wagons stood between them and the mounted men, and Canavan had to herd Sturges outside. Driving the cattleman ahead of him, he forced him to march along the line till they came to a foot-wide gap between a couple of wagons. There was lantern light on the far side of the barrier, and Canavan glimpsed shadowy figures moving about. He caught Sturges by the arm and spun him a step inside the gap. Canavan stepped back and crouched down behind a high rear wheel with his gun still pointed at Sturges.

"All right," he said to the rancher, silently. "Speak your piece and make it good."

Sturges made a throaty sound.

"Men," he began, and Canavan, stealing a guarded look through the wheel's spokes, saw heads and faces turn in Sturges' direction. "Fleming and me have decided that this will do for tonight. The nesters ought to be able to figure out for themselves what they'll be in for if we have to come after 'em again. So you men can go home now." He stopped, and just as Canavan was about to prod him again, he added, "Oh, yeah. Pick up the dead on the other side of the wall and take them with you. I'll be along a little later on and we'll figure out then what to do with 'em."

For a moment there was no reaction to his announcement, no sound save the aimless pawing of hooves on the churned-up ground. Then it came—a sudden murmur of relief from the homesteaders. It swelled almost at once and became a jumble of happy and excited voices. The mounted men began to back their horses. Thumping hooves competed briefly with jabbering voices, then backgrounded them as the horsemen rode away.

A man shouldered his way through the laughing, milling homesteaders to where Sturges was standing, and Canavan heard him say:

"Thanks, Sturges."

The voice was Reuben Fisher's.

"Thanks for stopping things when you did," Fisher continued. "I think that was a good sign, that despite Canavan's belief that the only way to resolve differences is by force and violence, that you don't agree with that any more than I do. I'm of the opinion that if he hadn't taken it upon him-

self to interfere in matters that didn't concern him, there wouldn't have been any trouble between us. I think if you and I were to sit down together and talk things over, we could come up with a peaceful and satisfactory solution to our differences. Are you willing to try?"

There was no answer from Sturges.

"I asked if you were willing to try," Fisher repeated.

Suddenly Sturges, propelled from behind, came bursting through the gap. He collided with the surprised Fisher, trampled him, too, before the homesteaders, raising his hands instinctively to hold him off, gave ground. A tall figure came through the gap and, holstering his gun, came up next to Sturges. The cattleman, breathing hard gave Canavan a hard look, but Canavan disregarded it.

"You don't learn, do you, Reuben?" Canavan chided Fisher. "You still think you can make friends of people who hate your guts, don't you? And you thought that was a good sign, huh, when Sturges called off his dogs and sent them home? I hate to disillusion you, Reuben, but Sturges didn't do that out of the goodness of his heart. It so happened that I was holding my gun on him, and he did and said what I told him to, and not for any other reason."

Canavan's eyes, ranging around the circle of faces turned to him, sought Molly. She was standing off to one side, with young Johnny in front of her.

A MAN came trudging up with three lighted lanterns swinging from each hand. He was relieved of them, and those who took them held them up, lighting the spot.

"Couple of you men go get Fleming," Canavan directed. "You'll find him in the barn, in one of the stalls, sleeping off a headache. Bring him out here."

The homesteaders, one holding a lanter aloft, rounded the first wagon in the line and disappeared behind it. Minutes passed. When the two men returned they were supporting a hatless Fleming who was a little rubber-legged, between them. They led him up to Canavan. He lifted his eyes, stared at Canavan open-mouthed.

"Where were you and Sturges going to take these people?" Canavan asked him.

"Out on the range a ways," Sturges said before Fleming could answer.

"I asked him," Canavan said coldly to Sturges. "What were you going to do with them, Fleming, once you got them out there?"

"Just leave them there," Sturges said quickly again.

Canavan looked annoyed.

"What were you going to do with them, Fleming," he asked again, ignoring Sturges' reply.

Fleming did not answer. Canavan suddenly lunged and grabbed him by the shirt front and raged at him:

"I want an answer, and I want an honest one, and if I have to beat it out of you, I will! Now will you talk, or d'you want me to make you?"

"We—we weren't going to take them out there at all," Fleming faltered. "We were going to take them out to Sleiger's old place."

"What's out there?"

"A ravine."

"All right. And then?" Canavan was tightening his grip on Fleming's shirt.

"I—I was against the idea," Fleming protested wildly. "If we'd killed 'em all in a fight, that woulda been one thing. But to kill them in cold blood—"

"And then dump them into the ravine?"

"Yes. That was what Sturges wanted to do."

"What *I* wanted to do?" Sturges yelled. "Why, you—you yeller-bellied liar, that was *your* idea right from the beginning! I ought to punch you right smack—"

Canavan flung Fleming away, sent him reeling back, whirled around and struck Sturges savagely in the face. The cattlemen staggered backward, collided jarringly with the wagon behind which Canavan had crouched, and slid down on his backside. Canavan leaped after him, dragged him up again, slammed him back against the wagon and held him there.

"Now it's your turn to talk, mister," he told Sturges. "And you'd better talk a lot, and fast. You wouldn't give Fleming a

chance to answer, kept horning in on him when I wanted to hear what he had to say. But now that I've heard all I wanted from him, I'm ready to listen to you. So talk, mister. But before you do, I'll tell you something. I knew all about the raid you and your pardner over there were cooking up. Embree tipped me off. Then he tried to talk me into going after you and killing you, claiming you stood between the nesters and peace. I want to know what happened between you and Embree that made him want you killed off?"

"I don't know, Canavan. Honest, I don't. Y'see, when Pierce, the feller in charge of the Land Office—"

"I know what his job was."

"Well, when he told us there wasn't anything we could do about the nesters filing on our grazing lands, we went to see Embree about it. He was the one who came up with the idea of the raid. On top of that he said we didn't have anything to worry about once we got rid of the nesters. If a marshal showed up and did any looking into things, Embree said he'd cover up for us, and we'd be in the clear."

CANAVAN said sarcastically, "That was real nice of him, wasn't it? Then how came after he told you that, he turned around and tried to get you killed off?"

"Y'got me, Canavan. Damned if I can tell you."

"I think you can, Sturges. I think you two had a falling out over something and it had to do with Pierce's killing."

Sturges didn't answer.

"Well?" Canavan demanded.

"It had something to do with Pierce," Sturges reluctantly admitted. "That is, in a way. Y'see, the feller who killed Pierce was one of my hands."

"I know. And his name was Waco."

"But I didn't have anything to do with it," Sturges protested. "I didn't know what Waco was up to, or anything."

"Y'mean you want me to believe that Waco took it on himself to go after Pierce and kill him if he had to to get Pierce's record book away from him so that the nesters wouldn't have any official proof of their claims? Then you and the other cattlemen could've jumped in and registered your claims and nobody could have stopped you. You'd have had your lands back, and that would have been that."

Sturges still made no response.

"No, go, Sturges," Canavan said, with a shake of his head. "I wouldn't go for that story no matter what. I don't believe it, not one little bit of it. I think you put Waco up to killing Pierce just as I think it was your idea, not Fleming's, to kill every one of these people."

He released the rancher, turned away from him, looked at the two homesteaders who were standing just beyond Fleming.

"Their horses ought to be somewheres around here," he told them. "See if you fellers can round them up."

"Sure," one of the men answered.

His companion followed him away.

"What are you going to do with them, Canavan?" another homesteader asked.

"Hand them over to the law," Canavan replied.

"What good'll that do?" the man asked. "If the sheriff is working with the cattlemen."

"I don't mean the sheriff. The Rangers."

"Oh," the homesteaders said, obviously relieved.

"Now if the land office record book is gone, what proof will there be that our claims were registered and that we really own what we filed on?"

"When I hand over Sturges and Fleming, I'll turn over the book, too."

IX

TWO days later Giffy again appeared in the open doorway of the law office and ranged his gaze upstreet. After a bit he looked downstreet, then he glanced inside. The sheriff, a frowning and thoughtful expression on his face, sat slope-shouldered at his desk, and stared moodily into empty space.

"I'm beginning to think we might have made a mistake," Giffy suggested to him. "Maybe we should have gone out to that Fisher feller's place anyway. We wouldn't

ve had to let on that we knew anything out it and rode out to see what we could d out. Then we would have known what ally happened out there the other night."

There was no answer.

"This way," the deputy continued, "all know is that the raid came off, that all a sudden Sturges called it off. He told s crew that he'd follow them home, but w two days later they're still waiting for n to show up. Same goes for Fleming. e hasn't showed up at his home, either. hat do you suppose could have happened them two?"

"I don't know." The sheriff squared back his chair. "I reckon you know what I pe has happened to 'em."

Giffy grinned fleetingly. In a moment he ent on:

"Another thing is what could have happened to Canavan? We both saw him go aring out of here the night of the raid. ut nobody's said anything about seeing m anywheres after he left here."

Embree voiced no opinion of his own.

"Beats me how you can be busting with riosity and still do nothing to satisfy us," iffy said.

"It's not that easy, Giff, believe me," mbree told him wryly. "But since we are ot supposed to know there *was* a raid, if e were to ride out to Fisher's place, and ake out that we were just out checking ound, somebody might get suspicious. If ybody should stop by and ask me if I ard the shooting the other night, I'll say ourse I heard it. But because I didn't ink it meant anything, I didn't do anything out it."

"I see," Giffy said soberly.

"So we'll stay put here and wait and see hat happens."

Giffy's thick shoulders lifted in a shrug. "You're the boss," he sighed. "If that's e way you want to play it—"

Hooves drummed upstreet, and Giffy uck his head out again.

"Well, what d'you know!" he said. "Coley ye!"

"Oh?"

"This is the first time he's been around nce he tangled with Canavan and got his wrist busted. He's got some feller with him. Don't think I've ever seen him before. Dark-faced, skinny, lanky. They're pulling up in front of the saloon. Going inside."

Giffy turned back from the doorway to add, "Wouldn't it be something if it turned out that Sturges and Fleming are dead, and for Nye to kill Canavan now!"

"That's the way I've been hoping things would work out," the sheriff's heavy voice rumbled.

"Maybe they will. Things have a way of working themselves out, you know."

"I'm willing," the sheriff said.

Suddenly Giffy said, "Well, I'll be damned!"

"Don't tell me they're working themselves out already," Embree chided.

"Do you believe in miracles?"

"Nope," the sheriff answered flatly.

"You'd better," Giffy told him. "Because one's happening right now. You know who's coming down the street?"

"Nope. Who?"

"Canavan!"

The excitement in Giffy's manner and voice communicated itself to Embree. He fairly leaped out of his chair and across the floor to the door.

"Now do you believe in miracles?" Giffy wanted to know.

THE sheriff did not answer. He watched Canavan reach the saloon and pass it. Then movement on the veranda caught Embree's eye. The stranger who had ridden into town with Coley Nye had come out. They heard him yell:

"Canavan, you—" He called him an unmentionable name.

Canavan pulled up, twisted around, and looked back. The lanky man came down to the walk. He stood facing Canavan, a little spread-legged, with his right hand on his gun-butt. When Giffy moved out of the office doorway into the street, Embree followed him when Giffy started up the street at a jog, the sheriff was right behind him. When they neared Canavan, Giffy slowed, panted to a stop, and Embree bumped into him. Giffy was too excited to notice. Embree backed with him into the doorway of

a vacant store.

"Well, well, well!" they heard Canavan say. "Had to look twice to make sure it was you, Deglin. When did they let you out?"

"They didn't," was the curt reply. "I broke out. Kind of surprised to see me, huh, you red-headed sidewinder? I told you when you took me in that I'd get you some day, didn't I?"

"Did you tell me that?" Canavan drawled. "I must have forgotten over the years."

"I'm going to kill you, Canavan."

"You can try," Canavan answered evenly. "But I wouldn't bet on your chances. Not if you aren't any handier with a gun now than you used to be. The way I remember it, you shot that cattleman whose killing you went up for in the back. You weren't good enough to take him face-to-face."

"That's a lie!" Deglin screamed, face flaming. But he checked himself in almost the same instant, and said with surprising calm, "Had a couple of friends of mine keeping a lookout for you. When I got word you were hanging around Cuero, I busted out of prison and headed this way, hoping for just one thing—that you'd still be here when I got here. I ran into somebody who was looking to hire a gun to take care of you. Now, instead of killing you just for the satisfaction, I'm going to get some dinero out of it. I'm going to get paid for doing it. Get down off your horse!" Deglin's hand tightened around his gun-butt.

Canavan climbed down from the mare, never taking his gaze from Deglin's hands. He patted his horse, spoke to her, and she trotted away.

"All right, Deglin," he drawled casually. "What do we do now?"

"Here it comes!" Giffy whispered to Embree excitedly.

They saw Deglin's right arm jerk, saw his body half-twist as he yanked out his gun. But before he could snap it upward for a shot, there was gunfire—two, three swift shots. Embree and Giffy looked quickly in Canavan's direction, saw a thin wisp of blue smoke curling gently around him, saw it lift and dissolve. When they took their eyes from him and shot another look at Deglin, they stared hard. He was on his hands and knees, half turned away from Canavan, with his bowed head just above the curb, and sinking lower and lower. His body arched forward, and he slid over the curb, face downward in the gutter.

"That's that," Giffy said. "That's one feller who won't have to worry about sending back to serve out his time."

Slowly Canavan straightened up. He reloaded as he stepped up on the walk and started for the saloon. Embree's gaze ranged ahead of Canavan, to where Coley Nye was standing in the shadows of the doorway. Suddenly Nye stepped out on the veranda. His gun flashed in his hand, and roared twice. The sheriff blinked. When he looked again, Nye had retreated to the door. Canavan halted and, gun raised, waited for Nye to take another shot at him. Nye stepped out into full view at the head of the steps. He and Canavan fired at the same time. Embree, shuttling his gaze between the two, heard a curious thump, heard it repeated, looked wonderingly toward the saloon and saw Nye roll down the steps and strike the plank walk with a dust-raising thud and come to a full stop with his body rolled against one of Deglin's feet which were propped up on the curb.

Canavan stood motionless, a little crouched with his gun still holding on the fallen cattleman as the dust began to settle around him. But after a moment or two, when Nye did not stir, Canavan began to back off, though still watchful. Slowly he came erect, holstered his gun, and marched downstreet. The mare shrilled and came clattering up to him. He mounted her and rode away, the fleet mare's hooves drumming a swift beat as she carried him up the street and out of town. Embree looked at Giffy and said a little scornfully:

"Some miracle, all right. And if this is what you mean by things working themselves out—"

He shouldered Giffy out of his way and stalked off. . . . .

SOME two miles outside of Cuero Canavan heard the beat of oncoming horses. He slowed Aggie to a trot. Presently two

rsemen came into view; Canavan, recog-
zing them, nudged Aggie into faster move-
ent and rode on to meet them. The two
en, who wore silver stars pinned to their
irt pockets, eased themselves in their sad-
es as they reached Canavan.

"Get them?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure," one of the men answered.
Got full statements from all three of them.
eber didn't like the idea at first, arguing
at he didn't have anything to do with the
id. But then he gave in, told us every-
ing he knew. Booth and Kiley needed a
tle prodding, but they finally came through,
o. Add their statements to Fleming's and
e've got all we need to put Sturges and
mbree away for a long, long time."

"One of you gonna stay around Cuero
l a new sheriff takes over for Embree?"

"That's Steve's assignment, Red. My job's
pick up Embree and bring him in. Then
m heading south. Things have got a little
it of hand in a couple of Border towns,
nd the locals have been yelling for help.
o I'm it. Embree's around where I can
nd him, isn't he?"

Canavan nodded. "Oh, before I forget this,
ave," he said. "If there's a wanted out
r somebody named Deglin—"

"There is," the horseman, named Steve,
id, interrupting Canavan. "Busted out of
untsville after killing a guard. They'd like
n awful lot to get him back."

"Strike him off your list, Steve. He's
ead."

"I see. Cause of death?

"Oh, just say gunshot wound. That will
over it."

"Mightn't it be even better for Steve's
eport to say it was suicide?" Dave asked.

Canavan met Dave's eyes.

"It probably would be at that. That's
bout what it amounted to."

"Then that's what I'll say," Steve said.

"Meant to tell you this sooner, Red,"
Dave went on and Canavan's eyes held on
im again. "Started to this morning, but
omething else came up and I didn't get
ack to it. I saw Cap McDermott a couple
f weeks ago. He asked for you. Wanted to
now if I ever run into you. You'd make
im feel awful good, Red, if you'd get off
a letter to him when you get a chance. You
wouldn't have to tell him too much. Just
that you're all right. He'd be tickled to death
to hear from you." Suddenly Dave blurted,
"You know as well as I do, he didn't let you
go because he wanted to. He had to."

"I know. I'll write to him."

Dave nodded and held out his hand to
Canavan who gripped it.

"So long, Red."

"So long, Dave."

Steve shook hands with Canavan too, then
the three men backed their horses away.

"Good luck, Red," Dave called over his
shoulder as he wheeled after Steve.

Canavan looked back just once. There
was no sign then of the two Rangers. Heav-
ily, he settled himself in the saddle. . . .

WHEELING into the cut-through, Cana-
van glanced at the rock barrier as he
rode along it, and wondered if the home-
steaders had continued extending it. They
had probably stopped. But he didn't blame
them. Having to live in the uncomfortable
wagons already overloaded with household
goods and personal belongings, completely
uncertain about what the future held for
them, was enough to discourage anyone.

As he neared the barn, and the lined-up
wagons in front of it, he raised up a little in
his stirrups and ranged his gaze ahead eager-
ly. The site on which the house had stood
was fire-blackened and desolate-looking.
Only one corner upright remained, half
burned off, but still standing as though in
majestic defiance. There was no one about,
no sound of anyone, either. The silence, and
the smell of fire which hung in the air were
depressing. Abreast of the wagons he drew
rein. He gave a glad cry, he pulled up at
once. Johnny Fisher crawled from beneath
one of the wagons and ran to him.

"You've come back!" the boy cried hap-
pily. "You've come back!"

"Where is everybody, Johnny?"

"Working."

Canavan climbed down, lifted the boy into
the saddle, pushed the reins into his chubby
hands and asked:

"Want to ride her around for a minute,
while I get something from the barn?"

"Oh, sure!"

Canavan watched the boy ride away, then squeezed between two wagons and trudged into the barn. When he emerged his saddlebags were slung over his left shoulder and his blanket roll was caught up under his arm.

Molly Fisher suddenly appeared in front of him, and he stopped abruptly.

"Oh," he said. "Hello."

"You—you're leaving us?" she faltered.

"That's right, Molly."

"You were going without saying good-by to me?"

"I thought that was the way you wanted it."

Her eyes probed his face. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"To California."

Tears came into her eyes.

"Then I'll never see you again?"

He shook his head.

"I know it was selfish of me," she told him, "but I hoped and prayed you'd never want to leave us. Couldn't you stay on, if not here with us, then somewhere close by, so that I might see you even if only once in awhile? Just to know you're always within reach. . . ."

"It wouldn't be good, Molly."

"Then take me with you!"

She reached for his hand and clung to it with both of hers.

"Take me with you, Johnny!" she begged.

He looked down into her face.

"Remember that time in the hotel?" he asked her. "When I wanted you to go away with me? You were so right. It wouldn't have worked out, and it wouldn't work out now, either."

She sobbed softly, and bowed her head against his chest.

"And for me to stay around," he went on, "that's no good, either. That's why I've made up my mind to go. Maybe with me gone, and things settling down around here, you'll have so much to do, so much to plan for, you won't have time to think about me. You'll forget me after awhile, and be happy with Reuben all over again. He's a stubborn cuss, Molly, but he's a good man. Give him time and he'll catch onto the ways of the people around here, and he'll be an even better man for it."

The plod of approaching hooves reached them.

"Johnny," Canavan said.

Quickly Molly dried her eyes. When she led the way around the first wagon, Canavan trooped after her. Johnny rode up to them.

"How was it?" Canavan asked him.

"Gee, I wish she was mine!"

"Maybe you'll have one just like her some day."

CANAVAN reached for the boy, and lifted him off the horse. He draped his bags over Aggie's back, strapped his roll on behind the saddle. He chucked Johnny under the chin, climbed up, and settled himself in the saddle, and rode away. He looked back once, when he was nearing the cut-through. Molly was on her knees with Johnny in her arms, holding him tight against her. Canavan had to swallow hard to down the lump in his throat. . . .

The daylight was beginning to fade, lengthening the shadows, when Canavan recognized the cumbersome, swaying wagon that was rumbling along ahead of him. He whacked Aggie on the rump and the surprised mare bounded away, flashed past the wagon in such a burst of speed that it made the wagon appear to be standing still.

"Canavan!"

It was as he had expected—Doreen Gregg's voice. But he gave no sign that he had heard her. Swiftly the mare widened the gap between the wagon and himself. When the crunching grind of the wheels and the plod of the team's hoofs had died away behind, Canavan slowed Aggie to a lope and rode on into the gathering dusk.

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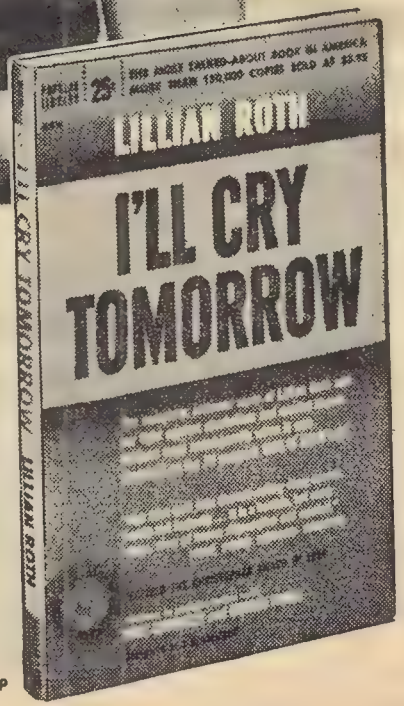

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FIGHT ALONE, DIE ALONE

A Novel by PHILIP MORGAN

Marsh had always been a loner who believed friends brought trouble — till the day a girl risked her neck to save his

I

HUGH MARSH heard the sounds of the horses long before they reached his yard. He was just finishing breakfast, he and Dan Leary, his only hired hand. Dan threw him one questioning look and rose hurriedly to move to the window and glance out. When he looked back at Dan, his expression was puzzled.

"It's Wade Lainson and four of his crew. There's one there I don't know. I don't like the looks of the bunch, Hugh."

"It's all right," Hugh said. "Wade doesn't like the idea of me

being here, but he won't do anything about it. He knows he can't budge me out of here without a fight."

He got up and reached automatically for his gun-belt, then changed his mind and moved out to the porch without it. Dan Leary uneasily followed behind him.

Wade Lainson rode into the yard at the head of his crew, a tall, well-built man of fifty, with the arrogance of the big owner plainly stamped on him. Lainson had been a power in this land for thirty years and the knowledge of that power was in everything he did and everything he said. He rode to within twenty yards of the porch and drew rein. Hugh came off the porch and into the yard, seeing three riders with Lainson that he knew. But it was the fourth man that Dan had mentioned on whom Hugh placed his greatest attention. He was a huge man, as tall as Hugh, but with thick, muscled shoulders and a short, powerful neck. His features were heavy and blunt and everything about him spoke of power. He wore a single gun, but it was tied down at the bottom, something unusual in this land. It marked the man as a hired gunman. For the first time, a faint tension began to sing along Hugh's nerves.

"Get down, boys," Hugh invited.

"No," Lainson said harshly. "I came to find out if you'd changed your mind any about helping us move these nesters out of the valley."

Hugh shook his head. He was watching the big man behind Lainson and thought he saw satisfaction come into that one's face. There was something going on here that wasn't quite clear yet.

Hugh said, "The nesters haven't bothered me, Wade, and I never fight another man's battles for him. If you want them moved, move them yourself."

LAINSON'S said, with heavy stress on his words, "If a man is not for me, he's against me. That means he's for the other side. I've tried to be fair with you, Marsh. I let you take this part of my range and never ran you off. But now things have changed. They're closing in on me and I have to know who my friends are. I'm asking you one last time to change your mind."

"You know me better than that, Wade. You never gave up a thing to me, or anybody else. I settled on this land and when you came to put me off, I whipped you. You decided it would cost more to try and run me off than the land was worth, so you let me alone. Now you come and ask me to help you run out a bunch of dirt farmers. You've already got more land than you need anyhow. No, I haven't changed my mind. Kill your own skunks." He saw anger raise a quick flush in Lainson's face and the cattleman's eyes went cold and strange. Hugh heard a horse come around from the rear of the house and whirled. He saw Joe Proctor's rifle covering him and Dan Leary. Dan's hand started toward his gun, but Hugh cut off the draw.

"It's a stacked deck, Dan. Let it alone."

Dan uttered one short curse and stood silently waiting. Hugh turned back to face Lainson, rage whipping through him. He thought of his gun hanging on the back of the chair in the house and swore silently.

"Maybe you had the idea I was playing for fun," Lainson said. "Either you go along with me, Marsh, or you're through in this country. What's it going to be?"

"You can go to hell," Hugh said.

Lainson shrugged. He glanced at the big man behind him. "You better see to it that he understands we mean business, Ferris."

The big man said, "A pleasure," and came from saddle in one smooth, flowing motion that warned Hugh at once. The man Ferris was big, but he was not clumsy. He moved with the deceptive ease of a cat. Ferris was smiling, enjoying this. He moved forward slowly until he was five paces from Hugh, then he rushed forward and swung a tremendous blow at Hugh's head. Hugh went in under that blow and hit Ferris with a solid right to the belly. It hurt Ferris, but not as much as it should have. The man's muscles were hard. His rush had carried him by Hugh and now he circled, watching Hugh with sharper attention.

When Ferris came in again, he came slowly, his guard up. Hugh went to meet him. As he started a right for Ferris' jaw something smashed against the side of his head

l the world was suddenly black. The th came up and hit him in the face and rolled desperately over and over to escape tamping, waiting for his vision to clear. lling finally to his knees, he could see rris coming at him and he drove upward, inging his right from the ground. The w smashed solidly against the big man's v. The shock of it carried all the way into igh's shoulder. Hugh thought he must e broken Ferris' neck and didn't care. wanted to kill the man.

Ferris went down hard, but he was up at ce, but he was no longer smiling. Murder one in his gray eyes. He moved in and y stood close and hit each other, blows ding with sodden thuds. Rage burned agely in Hugh and he felt no pain. He the shock of the blows and he felt the d of his arms, but all that was in his mind s a blind need to whip this man. Ferris' e was slowly losing shape. Blood streamed m cuts over both his eyes and his lips re puffing and badly cut.

UT he was a powerful man and he refused to go down. He swung a roundhse right that Hugh didn't duck. It ocked Hugh off-balance and he went down ain. Again Hugh rolled over, got his arms der him and pushed to his knees. As rris came swaying toward him Hugh dived the man's legs, tripped him up and ought him down. He crawled on top of rris and slammed his right and left, driv- the man's head helplessly from side to e. Ferris was groaning, but Hugh did let up. He heard a shout, then two of Lazy L hands were dragging him off. The two punchers held him upright while rris struggled painfully to his feet. Ferris od there a moment gathering his strength, n his hand went for his gun.

Wade Lainson said, "Leave it alone, Fer-," and Ferris stopped the draw. Lainson oked down at Hugh Marsh and warned, Next time I won't stop him. Get out of the untry, Marsh. I'm through playing ound."

Hugh's lips were cut and bleeding and his rds weren't clear, but he spoke slowly and th a terrible intensity.

"I'll be here when you come back, Lainson. I'll be here and I'll kill you for this. You want a fight. All right, you'll get one and it'll be one like you never saw before."

Lainson swore and drove his horse forward. His foot came out of the stirrup and swung in a vicious arc. Hugh tried to move his head aside, but the brutal beating he had taken had slowed his reactions. Lainson's boot crashed against his jaw and he pitched forward unconscious.

When Hugh came to, he was in the house and Dan Leary was bathing his face with a cold towel. Hugh pushed him away and sat up, pain rioting all through his body at the sudden movement. His head spun badly for a few moments. Leary hunkered back on his heels, his hard face pinched with anger.

"They're a bunch of yellow dogs. Next time it will be different. What the hell started it all of a sudden?"

Hugh shrugged. "It's been coming. He's a hog for land. When it was just us, he didn't think it was worth the trouble to start a fight. But the nesters have taken a big bite out of his summer graze. He decided he better run them out and he must have figured he would get rid of us at the same time." Hugh rubbed his aching jaw. "That man Ferris can hit."

"So can you," Leary said and grinned. He sobered at once to ask, "What are we going to do about it? We can't whip his whole crew."

"We can try. Before he runs us out, he'll know he's been in a fight. Maybe he'll get a belly full and leave us alone." He pushed to his feet and the pain started in fresh again. After a minute, the room stopped going around. "Saddle my horse for me, kid. I'll ride in and have Doc Martin patch me up a little. Be back by sundown."

On the ride to town, Hugh had time to think. What he had said to Dan Leary made him see it himself more clearly. He had been a thorn in Lainson's side. When he had taken the land, he had done it in a high-handed way, simply settling on it and calling it his. He had whipped Lainson when the cattleman had come to run him off. His life had been hard from the beginning and the years had formed him into a silent, taciturn

man who asked no help from anyone. Asking for help was a sign of weakness and he was not weak. The people in this land did not like him. They thought he was proud and cold. Looking at it now, he saw they had reason to think so.

IN THE tough years that had molded him, he had become hard. He had fought to stay alive. There had been no time to make friends and now that he might have taken the time he had forgotten how. All he knew was hard work and how to fight to keep what he had. The nesters avoided him because he was a cattleman, and the cattleman avoided him because they didn't understand him. Or maybe because they did. It left him standing without friends. That was all right. He had got by alone before and he would this time. He refused to worry about it.

When Hugh came into Doc Martin's office, Nancy Martin was there alone. She was the doctor's daughter, a pretty blonde of twenty, tall and well-formed. Warm-hearted and gay she was courted by every single male in a twenty-mile radius. Hugh had met her, had danced with her once and had meant then to see her again. But he had put it off, feeling inadequate when he was with her. It had been too long since he had talked to any woman.

Now she took one look at his battered face and led him to a chair.

"Dad's down the street getting something. He'll be right back. What happened to you? You look like you've been run over with a team and wagon."

"Wade Lainson decided I'd held onto part of his range long enough. He paid me a visit this morning."

The girl said soberly, "He's been visiting the nesters in the west end of the valley, too. It's pretty bad for them. Especially those with children."

Hugh shrugged. "Nothing's ever free. They better stand up and whip him."

"They aren't fighters," she answered hotly. "*You* can talk like that. You wear a gun and you apparently know how to use it. You've been in fights before. But they have rights; they're human beings."

"Just the same, they'll either fight or be run out. If the land means enough to them, they'll fight. But it's their worry."

"I imagined that was how you would feel," she said, her voice edged with sarcasm. "You don't think much of anyone but yourself. It's too bad. You must be very lonely."

He looked at her sharply, surprised that she should know that much about him. "Everyone's lonesome part of the time. I've made my own way since I was fifteen. I started with nothing, and now I've got a place of my own and some good beef. No one offered me any help when Lainson tried to run me out at first. I stuck and I beat Lainson at his own game, and I didn't go crying to anyone for help."

He wished she wouldn't watch him with that cool, appraising look. She seemed to see right through him. She reminded him of all the lonely nights and she seemed to radiate a special kind of warmth and understanding that could draw all the loneliness and hurt out of a man. He knew right then that he wanted her and he knew he didn't have a chance.

She said then, "And when Wade Lainson runs you off, you won't have anything. At least the nesters will have their families and their friends. It is like money in the bank for them. It is something you should learn, Hugh."

At that moment her father hurried into the house. He had seen the horse tied in front and knew there was a patient. Doc Martin was a small man, with all of the small man's swagger and cockiness. His manner was abrupt and he presented an iron cynicism to the world, but his innate kindness was well-known through this country. Taking one look at Hugh, he whistled sharply.

"You're a pretty mess."

"Nothing broken, Doc," Hugh said. "I thought maybe you could just fix me up a little."

"You must have been visited by that man of great human kindness, the people's choice, Wade Lainson. He's been all the way down the valley to Frenchman's Creek spreading his cheerful gospel. I passed his outfit on the way back to town . . . Nancy, get some water and cloths. We'll clean him up."

"You look like you've been run over with a wagon," Nancy said

WHEN she brought them, Martin worked fast on Hugh's battered face and his hands were light and easy. He felt Hugh's nose carefully and inspected the battered lips. He felt down the ribs and made Hugh work his fingers and hands. Finally satisfied, he straightened.

"You'll live. Nothing's broken, but you'll be plenty stiff for a few days. What happened?"

"Lainson ordered me to move. I told him I was staying. So he turned his bully boy loose on me."

"You mean to say the man of iron got whupped," Martin said with wry humor.

"I had him whipped and two of them grabbed my arms. Lainson finished it with his boot."

Nancy said quietly, "For once you weren't big enough to handle something alone."

"Don't rub it in, daughter," Martin remarked chidingly. "Marsh is a man who never needs any help."

Hugh came to his feet, anger roiling through him. "What's wrong with a man who takes care of himself?"

"Not a thing," Doc Martin answered easily. "But you've got the idea you can make the trip through this vale of tears without help and without giving help. Bad idea, even if it worked, which it don't. A man's got to have a few friends in this world. He's got to join the human race."

"Maybe," Hugh said bitterly, "but I don't

see it that way. You go depending on someone and when trouble comes he's not there. I can handle my own troubles. Lainson won't run me off. Before I'm through, he'll be whipped."

"And a lot of nesters will be dead," Nancy said. Her face was flushed and it heightened her beauty. Seeing her this way made Hugh's heart ache. He didn't want it this way. He wondered why it was that he invariably angered those few people he wanted most to please. It was that way now. Wanting to please the girl, he was only increasing the gap between them.

Picking up his hat, he asked, "How much do I owe you, Doc?"

"Two bucks," Martin said and added, "I hope I won't have to dig a piece of lead out of you before this thing is over. Wade Lainson is as set in his ways as you are."

II

HUGH paid Dr. Martin, then looked at Nancy, wanting to say something to put himself in a better light with her. He could think of nothing. He was about to leave when the front door opened and three nesters came in. Hugh recognized them as Leander Ketchum, Conrad Schwartz and Pete Grimes. They filed into the room, their faces solemn and grim. They were uncomfortable in Hugh's presence and shifted their feet uneasily. All of them were big men, work-hardened, and badly burned by constant exposure to the weather.

"We heard you was in the doc's office," Pete Grimes said. He was a tall, fair-haired man of thirty-five and more or less spokesman for all the nesters in the valley. "We heard you had a run-in with Lainson and his crew and we heard you was ordered out of the country. We heard it was open season on you in this country now."

"That's right," Hugh said, puzzled. "What's that got to do with you?"

"Lainson was down the valley this morning. He told all of us we had one week to get out, or he'd burn us out. It sort of puts us all in the same boat. The others thought maybe we ought to talk to you and see if we could band up. We could help you out and you could help us. Lainson's too big for you to fight alone and we could use someone with some savvy about these sort of things."

"I don't need any help," Hugh replied flatly. "And I won't have any time to be helping anyone else."

"I told them that's how it would be," Grimes said. He said it without emotion, simply announcing a fact. Watching him, Hugh had the feeling that Grimes could be a tough, stubborn man when he needed to be.

"How come you were so sure?" Hugh asked.

"You're a loner," Grimes replied. "A lobo wolf don't ever run with the pack. I've seen you riding. You're a proud man, proud of your strength and proud of your toughness. Well, that's all right, but it might pay to recall that a lone wolf don't usually live very long . . . Come on, boys." He started for the door.

Hugh didn't like Grimes judgment of him and he felt a touch of anger. But Nancy Martin was watching and he knew what she would be thinking. Also, Grimes' words had made him strangely uncomfortable. So he spoke shortly.

"Grimes, I won't be able to help you. But when Lainson comes back, all of you be together. Use shotguns on him. They won't like that. If you're smart, you won't wait for him. If you're smart, you'll hunt him out and hit him good and hard when he isn't expecting it."

Grimes turned, his expression puzzled. "Thanks, Marsh, I didn't think you'd go even this far." He thought for a minute then said, "We'll have to wait for him. We aren't the kind to start a fight like this. Most of us will hate the killing bad enough when it comes."

"Don't be full of goodness and light when he comes at you," Hugh warned.

"No," Pete Grimes said reflectively. "If he starts this fight, we will show him no mercy."

He ducked his head at them and turned out of the door at once, the two other men following him. Hugh looked at Nancy Martin uncomfortably.

"That was your doing. I never stick my nose into another man's affairs."

SHE was smiling slightly and she said softly, "So we weren't wrong after all. There is a heart buried deep under all that granite." Doc Martin chuckled.

"If you thought so, why all the advice?" Hugh asked, puzzled.

"If we hadn't thought you were worth saving, son, we wouldn't have gone to the trouble," Doc Martin told him.

"Well, thanks for fixing me, Doc." Hugh turned to Nancy. "Maybe when all this is over, you wouldn't mind me calling on you."

"We'll see," she said, but her eyes were no longer cold.

He left the house then, a faint hope stirring in him. Once mounted, he decided he needed a meal. He ate, then rode out of town.

Once out of town, he found that he was restless and did not want to go back to the ranch. He turned off and rode to his west line. He spent the afternoon riding, moving his beef back from his boundary line with Lainson's Lazy L. It was always easier for him to think when he was working. But all afternoon, a girl's face kept appearing before him and he saw again the faintly accusing expression in her blue eyes. All afternoon he kept seeing Pete Grimes' face, too, so set and determined. It was not easy, but gradually he began to accept what they had said about him. Maybe he was proud, and maybe he had been too much alone. It was something to think about.

It was almost dusk when he started home. He was still a mile from the ranch when the firing broke out. It unmistakably came from his yard. Jabbing the black with the spurs, he went up the grade on the dead run. It was impossible to make good time on the steep grade and he had to listen to that wicked fight without being able to join in. The trail climbed steeply until it leveled off into his yard. There several guns were going and he could hear the reports of Dan Leary's Winchester, sharper sounds than the answering .45s. Suddenly the firing stopped and fear and rage ran through him in an icy flood. Unless Leary had fallen, the firing would have continued. He knew that, yet refused to accept it. When he ran the black into the yard, he could hear riders moving up the hill trail above the ranch. Moonlight was bright and he could see the single shape sprawled full length in the yard's silver dust. Knowing what he would find, he swung down and turned that man over. Dan Leary's sightless eyes looked up at the night sky with an unwinking attention.

Hugh went a little crazy then. He paced the yard, swearing in a terrible voice. It was fifteen minutes before he could get his feelings in hand. It had been Lainson, of course. In the morning when he had come here, Lainson had been a human being. But some time during the day, in his ride down the valley, the sense of power had overcome all his humanity. This morning he had had a little mercy, but tonight he'd had none. So he had come back to finish the job he had started this morning. Only Hugh hadn't been there. Lainson had hoped to make an example of Hugh Marsh, one that the valley nesters would remember. Only one thing went wrong. Dan Leary had been the example. That poor judgment was going to cost Lainson his life. Hugh vowed that, standing over the body of his friend.

Hugh buried Dan Leary and reached far back into the forgotten past and remembered a prayer to say for this man who had been such a loyal friend. Afterward, he went to the house and packed a gunnysack with food, wrapped it in his slicker and tied the bundle on behind his saddle. He rose to the leather and sat for several minutes, looking at the house and buildings he had put up with so much sweat and so much hard work. Two years of his life were wrapped up in this place.

BUT the buildings wouldn't be here when he came back. He knew how these things went. Lainson would burn him out. Finally, feeling the greatest possible regret, he clucked to the horse and rode up the hill trail on the heels of Lainson and his men.

Lainson's ranch lay in a scooped-out pocket of the hills and was surrounded by a heavy stand of timber. At daylight, Hugh Marsh was lying on the ridge west of the ranch and in close. He had managed to get a few hours of sleep. His horse was tied well back in the timber out of range. In the clear air, sounds carried and he could easily hear when some-

one began pounding around in the kitchen shack. When smoke began to rise from the chimney he levered a shell into the Winchester and settled down. Shortly the bunkhouse door opened and Joe Proctor came out. He stood outside the door, stretching hugely. Hugh brought the Winchester up and sighted on Proctor's chest, having an easy shot at two hundred yards. But he couldn't do it. Lowering the sights, he drove his shot into Proctor's leg.

The sound of that shot racketed all around the pocket. Proctor sprawled full length, then rolled over and over, clutching his leg and howling out his pain. Startled yells broke out from the bunkhouse, but no one showed his head. Hugh began deliberately firing through the windows of the bunkhouse and kept it up until he heard a yell of pain. Reloading, he put seven shots through the window of the house and smiled tightly when he heard Wade Lainson's voice bellowing at the crew. A rifle opened up on him from the bunkhouse then and he knew it was time to be going. Pulling back through the timber, he reached his horse and swung up. It was started now and it wouldn't end until either he or Lainson was dead.

Hugh moved away from the Lazy L at a run, hearing the sounds of pursuit build up behind him. He hadn't expected it quite so quick and he had a bad moment when he heard three of Lainson's riders breaking for the trail to the higher country. He had expected to hole up there. With sure knowledge now that it would be a bad thing to do, he turned his horse back toward the valley. They had him temporarily boxed. Some time before they herded him down to the open valley, he had to get back through them and reach the broken country in the hills behind the Lazy L.

Hugh moved down through the comparatively open timber, seeing cattle in all the glades. Sunlight moved in patches through the trees and made pools of shadow that were deceptive. Lainson's crew would have all the trails covered, but he knew a small canyon below that would give him cover until the hunt had passed him. He could lay up there through the day and when night came he could work back to higher ground. On the way, he could fire some of Lainson's line cabins and he might be able to sneak in and set fire to the main house and buildings. For this was what it was now, an Indian way of fighting, striking and fading away and striking again until Lainson became so enraged he made a foolish play and somehow became separated from his crew. Then Hugh could face him and the fight would be over, one way or another.

With these thoughts in mind, Hugh worked slowly and carefully downward, drifting westward toward the small canyon. He was in no hurry, because the pressure had not been too great.

NOW the day gradually was going. He had sat well back in the timber for a couple of hours and watched as the Lazy L crew, working in pairs, searched this country for tracks. He had seen them meet and report and then fan out to search again. He had seen the gunman Ferris and Wade Lainson once at a distance of three hundred yards and he could have dropped one of them. But he could not give his position away yet.

It was time to get to the canyon. Hunger was beginning to bother him. Once in under the canyon's protecting rims, he could build a fire and get something to eat. He would need that, if he was going to spend another night in the saddle. That and a few hours' sleep.

A mile from the canyon and only a short distance up from the floor of the valley where the timber ended, he came to a large clearing in the forest. He halted on the near side of the clearing, considering it. It was dangerous to cross it while it was still light. But he hadn't heard anyone for awhile and was really getting hungry. He had either to cross it, or wait for darkness, still a full hour away. It was a gamble, but he decided to take it.

Hugh came out of the timber with his horse at a dead run, heading for the trees on the other side of the clearing. Instantly he heard shouts from a man on the slope above the clearing. The man was behind him and for a hundred yards had a good shot at him. It had been a bad gamble. Hugh raked the horse with the spurs and the black plunged ahead, at exactly the moment someone

opened up on him with a rifle. The rifleman was hurrying and his first two shots were wide. But just as Hugh entered the protection of the timber, a poker slashed into his left leg and tore through the shoulder muscles of the horse. The horse screamed in pain and Hugh grabbed the saddle-horn as pain hit him a solid blow.

He kept moving, knowing that he was dead if he stopped. His horse had not been badly wounded and he kept him running. When he had covered a mile he found the rim of the canyon in front of him. He worked along the rim until he found the dim trail down and took it, working slowly down the steep sides. Behind him, he could hear shouts, but the sounds weren't getting much closer and he thought Lainson's crew had failed to pick up his trail in the soft pine carpet of the forest. That was his only hope.

Hugh made it to the bottom of the canyon, where a small, brawling stream broke whitely over the rocks. He dismounted, and almost passed out when his boot struck the ground. It was then that he knew he was going to have to have help. He was losing a lot of blood and before long would pass out. Unless he found someone to fix the leg, he would bleed to death. With a groan, he hauled himself into saddle and turned the black down the canyon. The canyon broke into the valley a short distance down, near the nester settlement. If he could get that far, maybe he could make it on into town. It was worth a try.

The next hour was pure torture for Hugh Marsh. He reeled drunkenly in the saddle, but somehow managed to stay aboard the horse. Pain worked all through his body and each step the horse took was misery. They finally came out of the canyon and the lights from several of the nesters shanties shone warm in the darkness ahead. By this time, Hugh knew he couldn't make it to town. Turning his horse, he headed for that first light. He rode up to the shanty and called out weakly.

THE door opened and Pete Grimes came out, squinting into the darkness.

"Who's there?" Grimes called.

"It's Hugh Marsh," Hugh answered feebly. "I could use a little help, Grimes." He tried to hold himself up in the saddle, but the world suddenly whirled around and he knew nothing more.

He didn't hear Pete Grimes yell, "Mary, get a light!" and he didn't feel it when Grimes picked him up in his big arms and carried him inside. Grimes laid him on the bed and took a careful look at his wounded leg. He grimaced and said to his wife, "He's got to have the doctor. You stop the bleedin' if you can. I'll go get Doc Martin."

He left the shanty on the run and made it into town in fifteen minutes. Shortly he started back with Doc Martin. Nancy came with them against the protests of both.

III

AT THE Grimes place, the Martins went inside, but Pete Grimes stayed outside. Hugh's horse stood head down not far from the shanty. Pete saw the wound in the animal's shoulder and he covered it with salve, putting a halter on the horse then. After that, he mounted his own horse and led Hugh's mount back toward the timbered canyon from which Hugh had ridden. Well back in that canyon, Pete tethered the animal on Hugh's long rope. There was good grass here and the stream was near enough for the horse to reach the water. With luck, Lainson's men wouldn't find the horse. If they did, they wouldn't know where it had come from. He returned to his homestead, carefully erasing all the tracks he had made as he went.

When Pete went back into the shanty, Hugh Marsh was sleeping. Nancy Martin sat beside the head of the bed. Occasionally she dipped a cloth in a pan of cold water and carefully bathed Hugh's face. Doc Martin was just finishing washing up. He glanced at Nancy, then at Pete, and winked.

"She seems to think he's worth saving, Pete. I'm not so sure. Either way, though, he's got you to thank for being alive. Another hour and he'd have bled to death."

"How's his leg, Doc?"

"All right now. Just a bad flesh wound." He looked shrewdly at Pete Grimes. "Surprised you'd help him after the way he turned

you down there in my office."

Grimes shrugged. "I've never turned any man away from my door."

"Lainson will be around looking for him," suggested the medico.

"He won't get him, as long as I'm alive," Pete replied grimly.

"You're a sucker," Doc Martin remarked cheerfully. "Well, I better be getting back to town before someone misses me and reports it to Lainson. Joe Proctor and another of Lainson's crew were brought in this morning. Seems Marsh was over to the Lazy L at sun-up this morning and shot 'em up some. They'll be checking on everything, trying to find him." He looked over at his daughter. "Come on, Nancy. He'll live now."

"I'm staying," the girl said.

Doc Martin watched her for a moment, then grinned.

"All right. But he probably won't be able to see you at all."

"It won't matter," she replied without heat.

Pete Grimes and Doc went outside. When Doc was mounted, Pete handed him the reins of Nancy's horse. "Won't do for any strange horses to be around here. Lainson'll be by here by tomorrow, checking."

"Good luck, Pete," Doc said and rode from the yard, leading his daughter's horse by the reins.

Pete followed after him as far as the main road from town, erasing all marks of his passing.

Hugh awoke in the morning, to find Nancy Martin at his side. She flushed slightly and said, "So you finally got tired of sleeping. It's about time."

He looked around curiously. "Where am I?"

"At the Grimes' place," she said, got up and began busily straightening things. She refused to look at him. "Pete came to our house last night and got Dad to come and fix you up. I stayed when Dad went back to town. You needed attention, and if Dad had stayed, Wade Lainson would have known you were here. No one will miss me."

He said wonderingly, "You stayed here with me all night? And Grimes took me in? That doesn't make much sense."

SHE brought a bowl of beef broth from the stove and sat down beside him again. She said, "Don't try to make sense of it. Do you feel like eating?"

When he nodded, she began feeding him the broth. When it was finished, he fell asleep again. He fought sleep, but his strength was completely drained and he couldn't stay awake. It was the first time in his adult life that he had ever been dependent on anyone else. Always before, he had taken care of himslf. His helplessness frightened him.

The next time he awoke, it was to hear the sound of voices in the yard. He immediately recognized the gunman Ferris' voice and a brief panic touched him. He tried to raise himself up, but fell back, his head spinning. There was nothing he could do. He looked around for his gun-belt and saw it on the back of the chair, but the holster was empty. He thought he must have dropped his gun somewhere on last night's ride. He was trapped and could not defend himself.

A sense of fatality that had no touch of fear hit him, and he stopped trying to move and listened. Then he remembered Nancy, twisted his head, and saw her posted behind the shanty's door. Her face was set and white. She did not notice that he was awake. Her entire attention was on the conversation going on outside. Hugh could hear them plainly now.

Ferris had been talking, asking Pete Grimes if he had seen Hugh. Ferris had warned the nester not to hold out. Grimes' voice was cool and casual as he answered, "No cattleman rides down here, unless it's to make trouble, mister. You're barking up the wrong tree."

Ferris said, "Maybe we'll take a look." There was a creak of saddle leather.

"Leave us alone!" Mary Grimes cried then. "It should be enough for you to tell us to get out. But now you got to come tromping through my house. I'll scratch the eyes out of your head first."

There was a moment's silence. Then Ferris' voice said, "Let it go, Bart. He wouldn't be holed up here anyhow."

Saddle leather creaked again and presently the sounds of two horses leaving the yard reached Hugh. He realized that he had been

holding his breath and let it out in a long sigh. Nancy Martin came slowly across the room. She was shaking, and when she moved her hand from the folds of her skirt he saw that she was holding his revolver. Her fingers were white from gripping the butt and her thumb was curled over the cocked hammer. She let it down and carefully put the gun back in holster. Then she sank down in the chair and covered her face with her hands. Her shoulders shook violently. When she finally raised her head, Hugh saw that she had been crying.

"You would have shot him," Hugh said.

She jumped. Then she looked at him and her chin came up. "Yes, I would have shot him."

He raised his arms then and she ran to him and dropped on her knees beside the bed. She laid her head on his chest and he held her tight, feeling her shake from the violence of her reaction. He put his finger under her chin, raised her face and kissed her gently.

"Thank you, Nancy."

She was all right now and suddenly was embarrassed. She rose quickly to her feet. "You were helpless and they would have killed you. That's all it was."

HE GRINNED at her. "I hope not. I hope it was a lot more than that." Her eyes filled with a quick warmth, and she was about to say something when Pete and Mary Grimes came into the shanty. Both their faces were drawn from their brush with disaster.

"We got rid of them that time," Pete said, "but they'll be back. Lainson is liable to be suspicious when Ferris tells him we wouldn't let him in."

"If you'll give me a hand, I'll get up and get out of here," Hugh said.

"You can't walk, let alone ride," Nancy said quickly.

"If there was somewhere to take him, we could load him in the wagon," Grimes said. "It'll be dark in a little while."

"We'll take him to our place," Nancy said at once. "They won't look for him there."

"I've caused enough grief already," Hugh protested. "I feel a lot better. If I could have something to eat, I can make it back up into the hills. There's a place up there where I can hole up."

"You'd just break the wound open again," Grimes said flatly. "We'll do it like Miss Nancy says. I'll go bring up the wagon."

He left the shanty and the two women began to get blankets to make a bed in the wagon. Fifteen minutes later, they loaded Hugh into the wagon and set off for town through the early dusk. Nancy rode in back with Hugh and Pete Grimes drove, his shotgun resting across his knees. He kept well clear of the road.

They made the trip to town without meeting anyone and drove down the alley to the back of Martin home. Doc came out with a lantern, but Pete Grimes hissed at him to shut it off. In darkness the two men carried Hugh inside and upstairs. They took him into a room that smelled of perfume and got

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PRETTY PARTICULAR POISON

HAVING heard much of the "corn liquor" of the region, a party of tourists decided to stop in the Texas cow-country and try to buy some. An old man came to the door. "We heard you had some home-made liquor," they said. "Could we buy some?"

"Yep," said the rancher. "I got some. What kind you want?"

"Why, it's called corn liquor, isn't it?"

"Shore, but they's two kinds of corn liquor. You want courtin' liquor or fightin' liquor?"

—E. J. Ritter, Jr.

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him into bed with him protesting at being taken to Nancy's room. No one paid much attention to him. Finally it was done and Pete Grimes was ready to start back home.

Hugh reached out and took Grimes' hand and shook it. "Thanks for everything, Pete. I won't forget it. I didn't deserve it."

Grimes smiled, a tired smile. "A man has to help his neighbors when they're in trouble, Marsh. Oldest rule in the world." Then he was gone.

Doc Martin looked at Hugh's leg and grunted with satisfaction. "Didn't bust open. Shock's worn off by now. You'll be all right in a few days."

"I'll be riding out of here tomorrow night," Hugh said.

"You'll go when I tell you to, not before," Doc replied. "Now go to sleep." He looked at Nancy. "You get to bed, too. You look bushed."

She turned obediently and left the room, but at the door she turned and smiled back at Hugh, a smile that was as soft as a caress.

"Your intentions honorable, Marsh?" Doc asked when Nancy was gone.

"Of course," Hugh said, half angered. When he saw Doc Martin's grin, he knew the man had been chiding him. He returned the grin, settled deeper in the bed and let sleep close out all thought. . . .

HUGH MARSH stayed in the Martin house for three days. On the second day, he was able to sit up and eat, and on the third day he had his first turn around the room. Nancy watched over him faithfully, but she refused to come too close. Whenever she did, he pulled her to him and kissed her.

She told him, "I'd never get a thing done if you had your way."

She and Doc told him about the reports that had filtered down from the hills. Lainson and his crew had scoured the land. They had found Hugh's horse where Pete Grimes had staked it out in the canyon, and had made a search of the nester shanties. When they failed to turn him up, Lainson had decided that Hugh must have made it to the road and caught the stage out of the country. That had ended the search. For the first time, Hugh began to feel safe.

But on the afternoon of the fourth day Doc Martin came hurrying up the stairs and into the room. For once his expression was not completely bland. He was excited. Nancy was out doing some shopping. Doc said quickly, "I was just up at Bent's Hardware and two of the Lazy L crew came in and bought cartridges. They let it drop that Lainson is planning to raid the nesters tonight."

"I thought he gave them a week. It isn't up yet."

"It was a trick. He plans to hit them now before they're set for him."

Hugh swore and struck the table with the flat of his hand, making it jump. "Get hold of somebody and send him out to Pete Grimes. Tell Grimes to round up everybody and get them all at his place. As soon as it's dark, he can send the women and kids to town. Tell him I'll come out as soon as it's dark enough so I won't be spotted. Hurry, man!"

"You shouldn't ride yet," Martin warned.

"Do like I say," Hugh yelled, and Martin went.

Hugh walked slowly around the room, testing his leg. As long as he didn't put too much weight on it, he could get by. He had dressed that morning and now he slung his gun-belt around his hips, buckled it on and settled the gun firmly on his flank. He tried several practice draws until he was satisfied. That done, he waited impatiently for darkness.

When Nancy came back, she protested. But he reminded her of what Pete Grimes had done for him and also reminded her that she had asked him to help the nesters. Realizing that she was defeated, Nancy dropped the subject. She made Hugh eat a good meal, and when dark came, she saddled her horse for him. She and Doc came outside with him when he was ready to ride. Nancy kissed him and Doc shook his hand.

"I'd go along if I didn't know I'd be needed when it's all over," Doc said, and added wryly, "If I knew how to handle a gun."

"I'll be back," Hugh promised briefly and swung up, feeling the muscles pull and hurt in his injured leg. He settled on the leather,

easing the leg as well as he could. Lifting his hand to father and daughter, he rode away, feeling eagerness crowd him.

This was what he had been playing for all along, this showdown with Wade Lainson. It wasn't happening as he had planned it, but maybe this way was better. Standing together, he and the nesters would have a better chance for survival.

IT WAS with some wonder that he realized that all his old beliefs had faded away. With a grin, he saw that he was no longer the lobo. Now he was running with the pack and he felt better than he could ever remember feeling. Then, too, it was comforting to know that Nancy was waiting for him and hoping for him. It gave life a purpose that had been lacking.

Seeing himself as he had been, he knew he was not much better than Wade Lainson. His sights hadn't been set as high, but in time they might have been. It had taken a slug in the leg and a good woman to humble him.

IV

TWO miles from town, Hugh Marsh met the small string of wagons and buckboards carrying the nester families to safety. He swung out around them, not wanting to take time to talk. But he was relieved to see them. With them gone, a fight could be made. If the families had been there, the men would have been too worried about them to have put up a decent fight. Lainson would be counting on that, knowing that most of the men would give up their land rather than take a chance of their families being hurt.

When he was a quarter of a mile from Grimes' cabin, a sharp voice halted him with a quick, "Who's that?"

He reined in at once and said, "Hugh Marsh. I'm expected."

One of Leander Ketchum's tall sons moved up, a shotgun held lightly and easily in his big hands. He was grinning.

"Looks like a real shindig coming, don't it?"

"It could be," Hugh said, pleased with this young farmer. The young fellow had come up as silently as an Indian and he showed a pleased excitement at the prospect of a fight. "You listen close and when you hear them coming, get back to the house. Don't start anything. It would give the whole show away if they knew we were ready for them." Hugh rode on and the boy's tall form sank back against the earth.

There were twenty men in Pete Grimes' yard. They stood in an uneasy, loose circle, most of them liking this not at all. They were not fighting men by nature or by experience, yet they would fight stubbornly for land they considered rightfully theirs. Hugh swung down and shook hands with Pete.

"You've got a sizable bunch, Pete."

"They're willing, Hugh, but they need someone to show them what to do. This is all new to us."

"I'll be scratching my own back, too," Hugh said. He raised his voice so all could hear him. "We won't have a lot of time, boys, so we better get at it. I'll split you up into three bunches and we'll set a trap for them."

Someone in the bunch asked hopefully, "There's no chance we could talk peace with Lainson, is there? I don't much look forward to a slaughter."

"No chance at all," Hugh replied at once. "Get over any ideas of mercy. If Lainson thought he was in a tight, he'd make any kind of a deal—but he'd come back later and nail you one at a time. Settle it tonight. Break him, and you'll never be bothered again. It's the only way."

There was no further argument. Hugh split the men into three groups. He posted one group on each side of the road into the farm yard. They were to stay hidden until the Lazy L bunch were past them. They would join in only after Hugh's party had opened the ball. Hugh and Pete Grimes and four others took up positions in the house.

They had only an hour's wait, but it seemed much longer. Time dragged reluctantly by and Hugh could feel the tightness of the other men in the room. He felt the pull of tension himself.

But finally the Ketchum boy slid through the door and whispered, "They're coming! Sounds like quite a bunch." He grinned.

They could all hear the cattlemen then. They came on at a walk, and Hugh feared they might have been alerted. But they didn't stop. They came right up the road, past the two groups of farmers and came to a halt squarely in the center of the yard.

HUGH saw twenty riders in the group. He knew he should stay inside and pull the string on them, but at the last instant, he strode quickly to the door and stepped out into the dark night.

Wade Lainson called testily, "Is that you, Grimes? We're moving you out."

Hugh said softly, "A bad guess, Wade." As if his words had have a signal the night exploded into sound and flame and sudden death. Hugh was never sure afterward who fired the first shot. All he knew was that the blackness was suddenly alive with gunflame. The roar of the farmers' shotguns made a deafening racket. Hugh raised his own gun, sighted on a dark shape, fired, and saw his man go down.

Then the two groups beside the road opened up and the fight broke wide open. In that single brief moment, the Lazy L crew forgot about fighting and thought only of getting away. Men and horses were screaming, and they made a pitching, weaving target in the yard. They answered the nester fire, but the fight was gone from them.

They broke from the yard with Wade Lainson's voice lashing at them, trying to hold them. If he could have stopped his men, they might have had a chance, because the farmers might have become disorganized in the face of stiff fire. But he couldn't hold them. They had had enough.

Hugh kept up a steady firing and felt the breath of bullets that thudded into the wall behind him. He moved out into the yard looking for Lainson, but couldn't pick him out.

Quite suddenly, it was over. The Lazy L crew ran the gauntlet down the road and were gone. Silence fell, except for the groans and yells of the wounded. The farmers moved in cautiously, not quite believing what they had done. Here and there about the yard figures sprawled stiffly.

Wade Lainson's voice whipped across the yard from the barn. "Come and get me, Marsh! You've been looking for a crack at me. Here it is."

Hugh turned and limped toward the barn. He shoved fresh loads into his gun as he moved. And he thought with grim irony of the way fate dealt with a man. It always ended like this, with just two men facing each other. Lainson had hired his gunmen and Hugh had sought him alone. Then he had sided with twenty nesters. But in the end, it was just Lainson and him deciding the whole thing.

Lainson did not fire as Hugh crossed the yard. Hugh came up against the front of the barn and stood there a minute, thinking. The big double doors were five feet from him and Lainson, inside, probably had a sight on them. But Hugh knew he had to go through those doors to get at Lainson and there was nothing to be gained by waiting. Taking a couple of steps away from the wall, he moved up to the doors. He went through in one long jump, his gun held chest high.

Lainson was in one of the stalls part way back. He fired at once, the bullet slamming hard into the wall near Hugh. Targeting that bright slash of flame, Hugh fired and fired again. He waited, expecting Lainson to fire again, but nothing happened. He waited another minute, then walked slowly ahead, his gun shoved stiffly forward. He heard a faint scraping sound, then a faint sigh. Halting, he waited again, but nothing more could be heard. This time he moved ahead until his boot struck something soft. He recoiled tensely. Nothing. Kneeling, he struck a match and looked down into Wade Lainson's face. There was no softness in that face even in death.

WHEN Hugh came out of the barn, the nesters were all gathered in the center of the yard. Two of the Lazy L men sat inside that circle of farmers, wounded and beaten. Six others were dead. Two nesters had been wounded, but they would recover.

Hugh said, "Well, I guess that about winds it up."

"Except for Lainson," Pete Grimes said. "We didn't get him."

"He's out in the barn, dead." Hugh had

a thought then. "What about Ferris, the gunslinger?"

One of the wounded men said, "He broke for it right at the start. He's probably out of the country by now."

"Then that's all of it," Hugh said. "When I get to town, I'll send your families out." He walked across the yard and around the house to where he had tied his horse, limping badly now. Pain was a solid thing and he had to set his jaw to keep from crying out when he mounted the house.

Once mounted, he sat for awhile, realizing that tonight had been the end of an era in the valley. It had been dominated by cattlemen before, but would be no longer. Now cattle would share the land with the farmers. There was room for both, but it would not be the same. In spite of himself, he felt a faint regret.

When he came around the house, he found Pete Grimes waiting for him. "You better take care of that leg," Grimes said gruffly.

"I will, and thanks again, Pete."

"I know how tough this was for you, fighting with a bunch of farmers, but you made a lot of friends tonight. That much good came out of it anyhow."

"Why, I suppose you're right," Hugh said, and felt better. It wasn't just him against the world for a change. It was a good feeling. He smiled at Pete Grimes. "So long."

He rode quickly away, not wanting to keep Nancy waiting any longer. He was pushed on by a great need to see her. His life had changed in these past few days. It had become all tangled up in the lives of others and he found that that was the way he wanted it.

The town was quiet when he rode in. He was alert, because there was a chance that some of the Lazy L crew had come this way. But when he saw no horses along the street he relaxed. For the first time, some of the tenseness left him and he was filled only with eagerness to see Nancy. Turning down her street, he rode to the house and stepped down. The door opened at once and Nancy came out, calling his name. But before she could reach him, Ike Ferris' voice hit at Hugh from across the street, driving a chill clear through him.

"You made a bad mistake, Marsh. You figured I'd run like the rest. I didn't run."

Nancy gasped. That voice sounded loud in the stillness. Hugh wheeled slowly about, probing the darkness for Ferris, expecting a bullet every second. None came. Hugh could finally see the man. Ferris stood twenty paces away in the shadow of a tree and Hugh wondered why he didn't fire.

Then he said, "Don't be a sucker, Ferris. The thing's all over. Lainson is dead. There's no reason for us to be fighting."

"No man ever whipped me before," Ferris replied in a cold voice. "You did, and I'm going to kill you for it. You're good with your fists; better than I am. But you can't use a gun like I can."

SO THERE it was, the gunman's terrible false pride and vanity. Ferris was a man with no pride beyond that speed with a gun and his great strength. Take that away and he was nothing. He had to kill Hugh Marsh to save that pride, to prove to himself that he was greater with a gun than any man.

Hugh closed his mind then to everything but the need for survival. Coldness gripped him and he waited for Ferris to move, without fear. The moon was up now and he had a clear view of the gunman. Then he thought of Dan Leary lying dead and mercy left him.

Ferris drew, jerking his gun up with a savage speed that Hugh could not match. Ferris' first shot boomed, the echoes rolling on and on. The slug churned the dust beside Hugh. Hugh took careful aim and he had Ferris' chest in his sights when he dropped the hammer. He saw the slug hit Ferris and shake the big man. Ferris took a hesitating step forward, raised his left hand in a feeble gesture of protest, and fell heavily.

Nancy ran down the steps of the house and Hugh turned to meet her. She came into his open arms and he held her tight, feeling her shake as if she had a bad chill. She was crying and it was several moments before she could stop. Then Hugh kissed her.

"It's all over," he said soothingly.

She smiled then and her eyes were filled with tenderness. "No, it has just begun," she said, and pulled his head down again for her eager kiss.

SHOWDOWN

ON SQUAW CREEK

A Novel by RAY GAULDEN

No woman had ever stirred Shane Kimball the way this pretty nester gal did, but she hated him for shooting her brother

THEY reached the town of Moderia in the late afternoon, Shane Kimball and his Kicking K crew. When they had ridden across the old log bridge at the end of Main Street, Kimball hipped around in the saddle of his black gelding, grinning.

"Well, what are we waiting for?"

One of the riders let out a Rebel yell and touched his mount with the spurs. Another drew his gun and fired it into the air as they raced through the town, Shane Kimball leading the way.

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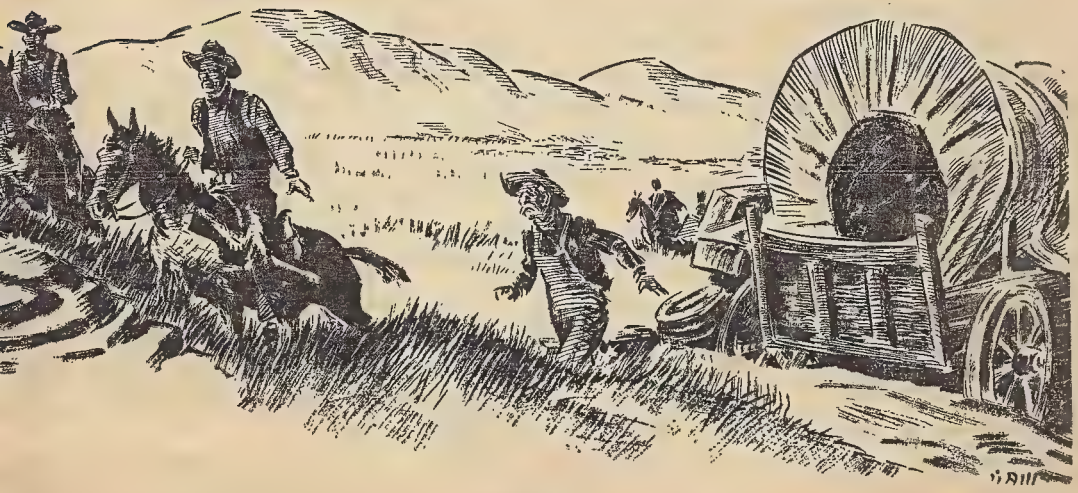

Townsfolk ran for the protection of the doorways, and the street emptied in a hurry. A freckle-faced boy standing in front of the general store watched the riders with big eyes. His mother spoke to him from the doorway, her voice shrill with urgency, and when the youngster paid no heed, the woman ran out and grabbed him by the arm, half dragging him into the store.

The storekeeper, watching from a window, chuckled. "Shucks, ma'am. There's nothing to get excited about. That's just Shane Kimball and his boys coming in for their Saturday night fun."

"Something ought to be done about that hellion." The woman stood there stiffly, her eyes shooting sparks. "Why, people aren't safe on the street!"

"Shane's all right," the storeman said. "He just hasn't quite growed up yet."

The boy was edging toward the door again. His mother took hold of his ear and pulled him back. "Now, Wilbur, you stay right here where I can watch you."

"Aw, Ma, you never let me have fun."

"Hush up, Wilbur," the woman said sharply.

Wilbur hung his head, pouting, and his mother turned again to the storekeeper. "If you ask me, it's time somebody did something to put a stop to the way that man carries on. What's the matter with the people in this town, anyway?"

The man wiped his hands on his flour sack apron. "Reckon folks ain't much different in this town than they are anywhere else, ma'am. Shane Kimball is a pretty important man in these parts. He owns the biggest ranch and has some pretty tough boys working for him. I reckon Shane wouldn't let nobody tell him what he could do or what he couldn't."

"Well, I'm going down and talk to the sheriff about it."

"You do that, ma'am," the storekeeper said, and had a hard time concealing his amusement.

IN FRONT of Carl Rossmyer's saloon, Shane Kimball and his crew reined up, laughing as they holstered their guns and swung down. Behind them, the raw-sienna-colored dust, kicked up by their horses, settled slowly. Kimball stepped upon the plank walk, slapping some of the dust from his tight-fitting levis and letting his gray eyes rove the length of Moderia's wide, wheel-slashed street.

Rusty Noland, Kicking K ramrod, a short, fat little man, bald except for a red fringe around his ears, ducked under the hitch-rack and came up beside Kimball.

"Come on, Boss, and let's have a drink. I'm spitting cotton."

"You and the boys go ahead," Kimball told him. "I'll be over later. Right now I've got a yen for one of those steaks they serve at the Star."

Noland tramped up on the saloon porch, paused and glanced over his shoulder. "Tell Millie I'll be over later, and she better save one of them T-bones for me."

"I'll tell her, Rusty," Kimball promised, and cut across the street, heading toward the Star Café, a few doors down.

Sheriff Lance Durfee rode by on his hammer-headed roan, saw Kimball and scowled. "You keep them boys of yours in line, Shane."

"I'll do my best, Lance," Kimball said, and kept going, a big man, but lean and hard-muscled.

Reaching the eating place, he opened the screen door and stepped inside, his spurs jingling as he moved along the row of stools. The café was crowded, filled with brown-faced punchers in from the neighboring ranches.

Kimball nodded and spoke to some of them, slapped one of them on the back. There was an empty stool at the end of the counter and he wrapped his legs around it, a smile lighting his broad, rocky face as he watched the waitress come toward him. She was a leggy blonde, not at all bad to look at.

"Hiyuh, Millie."

The girl leaned on the counter, seeming to forget there was anyone else in the place as she looked at Kimball. "It's sure good to see you, Shane."

"Good to see you too, Millie. You're getting prettier every day."

"You wouldn't kid a girl?"

"Wouldn't if I could," Kimball said, and glanced toward the kitchen. "How about one of my favorite steaks and what goes with it?"

Millie sighed and shook her head. "Food. That's all you ever think of when you're around me."

"Now, I wouldn't say that."

"Well, I'm saying it, and the only way you can prove I'm wrong is to say you'll take me to that dance at Haines' barn."

Kimball rolled a smoke, the smile still on his lips. "Why, I figured you'd be going to that shindig with Ernie Stafford."

"Oh, Ernie asked me all right, but I told him I'd have to wait till I saw you." Millie moved the sugar bowl around, her eyes remaining on Kimball's face.

"Reckon that didn't make Ernie any too happy," Kimball said.

Millie shrugged. "I can't be bothered. He kind of gives me the creeps." Distaste stirred in her eyes, and then her face brightened. "Anyway, what about the dance?"

"Not tonight, Millie. My boys are in town and I'll have to ride herd on 'em."

A rueful smile touched the girl's lips. "I never saw a man like you, mister."

"Hey, how about a little service down here?" someone at the other end of the counter called.

"Keep your shirt on, bud," Millie answered, and gave Kimball another smile before turning away. He shook his head, a wry slant to his lips as he watched her move along the counter, hips swinging.

With the steak and some fried potatoes under his belt, Kimball left the café, paused in front of the place long enough to shape a cigarette, and moved on toward the saloon.

The sun had dropped from sight now and shadows lay thick about the buildings. Most of the stores were closing and Kimball waved to some of the ranchers on their way out of town, returning home in their buckboards and wagons. The barber shop was still open and Kimball glanced in when he went by. The Mexican barber was working on one man and there were two others waiting.

REACHING the saloon, Kimball tossed his cigarette into the street and shouldered through the batwings. The barroom was filled with the usual Saturday crowd and Kimball saw Carl Rossmyer, a mountain of a man, lighting the lamps. Rossmyer had a good reputation. He ran a clean place, refusing to hire percentage girls or tinhorn gamblers. His whisky was hard to beat and Carl served it, claiming that when you ran your business yourself you never had to worry about some sticky-fingered gent getting his hands in the cash drawer.

Some of Kimball's punchers were playing poker and he nodded at them as he headed toward the bar where Rusty Noland stood with one foot on the brass rail, a half-filled glass in front of him. There was a sour expression on Noland's face that caused Kimball to ask, "What's the matter, Rusty? Carl hasn't started watering the drinks, has he?"

Noland shook his head. "No, it's that Ernie Stafford. He's been shooting off his mouth."

Following Noland's gaze, Kimball saw Ernie Stafford standing at the end of the bar, his mean little eyes bright with whisky shine as he stared at Kimball.

"What's the matter, Ernie?" Kimball asked without heat. "Can't you take a few drinks without getting ornery?"

Ernie set his whisky glass down hard and his thin-lipped mouth twisted. "I reckon your chore boy has told you what I been saying, Kimball, but now that you're here, I'll say it to your face. I think you're a damned cheap four-flusher."

"You better go on home, Ernie, and sober up," Kimball said quietly, and there still was no anger in him. He even managed to smile.

Ernie shook his head stubbornly. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying right here and getting something off my chest. You've lorded it over me and everybody else around here about long enough. I'm sick of it, fed up. D'you hear me?"

"You've been trying to rake up the nerve to face me ever since you and Lake came into this part of the country," Kimball said steadily. "Something's been eating you for months and now I reckon you figure I'm standing in the way of you and your girl.

Why, I've never even been out with her."

Ernie took a step away from the bar, his hand close to the butt of his gun. "You're a damned liar, Kimball!"

"Better watch it, Ernie."

"You don't scare me, mister. Not one little bit."

"I'm not trying to scare you, Ernie, but if you've got some notion of trying to kill me you better get it out of your head. You're not near fast enough, and if you wasn't all fired up with booze you'd know it."

"Mighty sure of yourself, ain't you?"

"Sure enough to know that I can put a bullet in you before your gun's clear of leather. I can drop you on the floor and stand here while you kick your life out in the sawdust. You're pretty young to die, Ernie, so you better forget it."

It was quiet in the saloon now and Carl Rossmyer, the sweat running down his round, pink face, stood behind the bar and chewed nervously at his lower lip. A few moments ago there had been noise, the click of chips, the slap of cards, and friendly bantering among the players. Now there was silence, as though someone had thrown a switch, shutting off all sound. The Kicking K riders looked on, their faces stony, and wondered if Ernie was going through with it, or if his big brother, Lake, would show up in time to keep the kid from committing suicide.

The bar was deserted except for the two of them, Ernie standing at one end and Kimball about half-way down. Ernie's face was tight and mean, and he kept his eyes on Kimball.

"You're taking a lot for granted, feller," he challenged, "but we'll see how much big talk you hand out with a bullet in your belly."

"I'm giving you one last chance to get out of here, Ernie," Kimball said slowly and softly.

"To hell with you!" Ernie Stafford's voice was harrsh, edged with resentment. "Folks have bragged about what a whiz you are with a six-shooter till they've got you believing it. They've got you thinking you're so good you can't be beat, but I aim to find out!"

II

UP UNTIL that last minute, Kimball thought it was just whisky talk in Ernie Stafford, a lot of hot words that didn't mean too much. Now he saw it could end only one way, for Ernie had got himself worked into a killing mood and there was no stopping him.

Fear was something Kimball had never known, and he did not feel it now as he watched Ernie Stafford's hand flash down, and heard the rapid scuff of boots as men sought to get out of the line of fire. The familiar excitement that Kimball always felt at a time like this came to him now, but mingled with the excitement was a slight sense of displeasure, and that was something new, something that made him wonder.

He had never been one to walk away from trouble. He had killed his share, faced them and beat them fair, and it had never bothered him. Now some of the old eagerness was missing, and he even thought about trying to leap forward and knock the gun out of Ernie's hand, something he had never considered in the past. Only a fool pulled a stunt like that when a man was ready to cut down on him.

Ernie's weapon was coming up, a bone-handled .45, and Ernie was pulling it fast.

You'll have to do better than that, Kimball thought, and leaned slightly forward.

His draw was a beautiful but deadly thing, a perfect coordination of mind and muscle. As Ernie's gun was coming in line, Kimball fired, and then let his six-shooter sag, as if he were sure that one bullet would be enough. Ernie started bending in the middle, bending over as if to take a bow. Then, losing his balance, he went down on his face. The gun slipped from his fingers and he clutched a hand full of sawdust. After a moment, he lay still, unmoving.

Carl Rossmyer's breath came past his lips in a long sigh of relief. He wiped the sweat off his face and reached for a quart bottle on the back bar.

"Ernie asked for it, Shane," the saloonman said soberly. "Better have a drink and wash the bad taste out of your mouth."

Rusty Noland came back to the bar, knelt

beside Ernie, and rolled him over gently. The ramrod shook his head slowly.

"There's nothing a doc can do for him. Should I have some of the boys take him down to the undertaker's, Boss?"

Kimball nodded, a strange dryness in his mouth. Men were pushing up to the bar, crowding around him. They slapped him on the back and told him it looked like he was still the best. After a moment, Kimball shook the dark mood from him, smiled, and called for drinks for the house.

Two of Kimball's riders, Al Henderson and Rod Horn, went over to take the body out.

"Better leave him be till the sheriff gets here," one of the townsmen said.

Carl Rossmyer scowled. "I don't want him laying there. It don't look good."

"Just as well go ahead and take him out," another man said from the doorway. "Sheriff won't be back for awhile. Had to ride out to the Bender place. The old man's on another tear and scaring the daylights out of his wife."

Kimball finished his drink and drifted outside. On the porch, he stopped and rolled a smoke and let his eyes wander idly along the street. It was dark now, the stores closed until Monday morning. The last customer left the barber shop and presently the lamp went out. The Mexican barber came out the door, locked it, and walked briskly up the street.

Beyond the town, Kimball could see the dark bulk of the Sangri Di Cristo range, and while he stared in that direction, a small breeze came up and felt good against his hot face. Restlessness stirred in him as he started to step off the porch, but a sound behind him drew his attention. When he turned it was to find a stranger, a smooth-faced young man with yellow hair showing beneath the brim of a floppy black hat, staring at him with deep admiration in his blue eyes.

"My name's Dennie Mercer, Mr. Kimball. You never heard of me, but I come from the Panhandle, down in Texas. My dad's got a ranch down there, a pretty big spread, but him and me never hit it off too well. I been hearing about you, Mr. Kimball, and a couple of weeks ago I got the notion that I'd like to meet you."

"How did you hear about me?" Kimball asked, puzzled.

"Reckon about everybody has heard of the great Shane Kimball."

KIMBALL grimaced. "Don't lay it on so thick, feller."

"I'm not trying to josh you, Mr. Kimball." Young Mercer's face was serious. "I met a feller down home that used to work for you, a gent named Joe Douglas. Remember him?"

"Sure, I remember Joe. When it came to busting broncs, there was none better. Worked for me about three years and when he was ready to pull out, he told me it was the longest he'd ever stayed with one outfit. I tried to talk him out of going, but Joe had an itch in his feet."

Dennie Mercer kept staring at Kimball, admiration still bright in his eyes. "Joe signed on to break broncs for my dad for a spell, and we got real friendly. Joe taught me a lot about horses, and he used to tell me about a feller he had worked for, the greatest man that ever walked in a pair of boots."

Kimball shoved his hat back, smiling. "Joe Douglas was always one to do a lot of talking, and he could tell some things pretty scary. There's nothing outstanding about me, Dennie. I'm just an ordinary feller that's had a little luck."

"I know better'n that, Mr. Kimball." Dennie shook his head.

"Just call me Shane."

"All right—Shane. But you can't make me believe that you're not all Joe claimed you was. Reckon I had my doubts at first, but not after what happened in there a little while ago."

"You saw it?"

"I sure did," Dennie said proudly. "And I've seen other fellers handle guns, but not the way you did."

A frown appeared on Kimball's forehead. "That don't prove anything."

"It does to me, mister, and I'm sure not sorry I made that long ride up here to meet you."

Kimball shifted uneasily, but there was something about this kid that he liked.

Warmth began to spread through him and he said, "Well, anyway, I'm glad to know you, Dennie."

Young Mercer looked down at the toes of his dusty boots. "Joe said for me to tell you I was a friend of his and you'd fix me up with a job."

"I don't know about that, Dennie. We've got a full crew right now."

The kid's eyes came back to Kimball's face, lips tight with determination. "Then I'll stick around till somebody quits or gets killed or something. I'll get a job in the livery barn for the time being, but I sure am not going back to Texas."

"Since you put it that way," Kimball said, grinning, "I reckon I'll have to find a spot for you. You got any money?"

"Spent my last two bits for breakfast this morning."

Reaching into his pocket, Kimball brought out a five-dollar bill. He handed it to Dennie and nodded toward the Star Café. "I'll advance you this on your first month's wages. Tell the waitress over there that you're a friend of mine and she'll fix you up with a good bait of grub. Meet you back here after while."

"Thanks, Mr. Kim—I mean Shane. Thanks a lot."

Dennie Mercer stepped off the porch and hurried across the strip of brownish-yellow dust. Kimball stared after him for a moment, smiling, then once more became aware of the restlessness in him.

Leaving the saloon, he walked down the street and came presently to the sheriff's office, a low-roofed adobe building with a wide crack to the left of the doorway running from the roof to the ground. Lance Durfee, a tall, bony man with brooding shadows in his sun-puckered eyes, came to the doorway and started out. When he saw Kimball, he drew up.

Kimball said, "Hello, Lance. Did you get old man Bender quieted down?"

"Yeah, I hid the butcher knife and gave him a good talking to."

Kimball's eyes moved to a building a few doors down the street. There was a sign over the door that said "FUNERAL PARLOR." Kimball stared at it somberly.

DURFEE said, "I know Ernie Stafford's in there laying on a table, stiff and cold. Tomorrow they'll put him in a box and dig a hole up yonder on the hill. They'll cover him with dirt, and that will be the end of Ernie."

"So you've heard about it already?"

"As soon as I rode in a few minutes ago. I was just coming down to talk to you." Durfee's eyes searched Kimball's face.

Kimball stared at the lawman steadily. "I couldn't help it, Lance. He pushed me into it."

Behind the sheriff a lamp burned in a wall bracket, throwing shadows over the unpainted walls of the office. Durfee remained in the doorway as he said, "That's the way I figured it was, Shane. Ernie's been building up to it for a long time, but that don't change the fact that he's dead, and Lake Stafford thought a heap of his kid brother."

"Then he should have ridden herd on him."

"Reckon Lake tried, Shane, but it's kind of hard holding a wild young cuss like Ernie down. Anyway it's done now and it'll stick in Lake's craw. He'll lay awake nights thinking about it, and he'll get to hating you more every day."

Kimball's shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Lake has never had any love for me, Lance, as you well know."

"I know that, Shane." Worry crept into Durfee's eyes. "I've seen men like Lake Stafford before. There's usually one on every range. He resents you being king pin here, of having folks look up to you and not to him. You'll have trouble with him one of these days, Shane, and what happened tonight could be the starting of it."

"I'm not going to lose any sleep worrying about it, Lance."

Durfee sighed heavily. "Reckon you never worried about anything in your life, Shane."

Kimball glanced toward the Star Café, thought briefly of Dennie Mercer, and looked back at Durfee, smiling. "You'd be a heap better off if you didn't do so much worrying, Lance. It's making an old man out of you."

"I'd worry less if I didn't have you on my mind all the time. Sure, I know a lot

of folks around here vote the way you want 'em to, but this job is not easy. Always somebody coming in with a complaint about the way you and that tough crew of yours carry on. Was a woman in today and I thought I'd never get rid of her."

"We don't mean any harm, Lance."

Durfee shook his head slowly. "I've known you for a long time and I still can't figure what makes you tick. You've got a big ranch, a fine house and plenty of money, but it don't mean anything to you. What have you worked so hard for, Shane? Where are you heading?"

Kimball's mouth turned sour. "Sooner or later you always get around to that. I think I'll leave."

"Don't get sore now. I'm saying something that makes sense. You're too damned reckless, too quick to use your fists and a gun. Hell, man, you're close to thirty, and it's time you was settling down. Get yourself a wife. It's not right for a feller to live without a woman. It—"

"Good night, Lance. See you around." Kimball turned and walked back up the street.

Dennie Mercer was waiting for him in front of the saloon. "Good food over there," the kid said. "And that waitress is real nice to look at."

"Now that you've got the wrinkles out of your belly," Kimball said, "What do you say we hit for home?"

Dennie glanced toward the batwings. "What about your crew?"

Kimball smiled. "They won't be along till Rossmyer can't stand 'em any longer and has to throw 'em out."

They turned to the rack, got their horses, and rode swiftly out of town. The Kicking K lay to the west of Moderia.

It was late when Kimball and Dennie Mercer reached the ranch. At the corral, Dennie sat his saddle for a long moment, something akin to awe in his eyes as he looked over the layout.

At the foot of the Twin Peaks, Kimball had built his house. It was made of logs and well put together. There was a long front porch and from there you could look out across the range, mile after mile of rich grazing land. Below the house stood a huge barn and behind it a maze of pole corrals. There were several smaller buildings, a cook shack, and a bunkhouse.

WHEN they had unsaddled and turned their horses into the corral, Kimball took Dennie down to the bunkhouse and found the kid a bunk that wasn't in use.

"If you're still awake when the boys come in," Kimball said, "tell Rusty Noland that I signed you on."

Dennie nodded and tossed his warbag into the bunk. He said, "I think I'm going to like it here. Thanks again, Shane."

"See you in the morning, Dennie."

Kimball went out and turned toward the house, aware of the deep silence that held the high country at night. He thought of his trip to town and the knowledge that he had found no pleasure in it brought a vague disturbance. Usually he stayed with his crew, drinking and playing poker half the night. Was it remorse over killing Ernie Stafford that was troubling him? He didn't think so.

He mused, must be getting old, and, pushing the thoughts from his mind, he started to whistle a little tune.

III

THE next morning, Kimball slept later than usual. When he went down to the corral he found half of his crew sitting on the fence watching Rod Horn try to shake the kinks out of an ornery, hammer-headed roan. The bronc was bucking and squealing for all he was worth.

Rod Horn, a big, swaggering man, a little ugly due to a broad nose that had been flattened in a barroom brawl, fancied himself somewhat of a bronc-stomper. But Kimball could see that the roan was giving Rod a run for his money and the big fellow didn't look so cocksure as usual.

"Ride him, Rod!" Kimball called, laughing, but before the words had left his mouth, Horn lost his seat and went sailing.

He came down hard on the seat of his levis and sat there a moment, staring dazedly at the roan as the horse went on pitching

about the corral, stirrups flapping and churning the dust.

Finally Horn picked himself up and came limping over to the fence, a rueful grin on his rough face. "I've ridden a lot of 'em," he said, "but that mean-eyed son is the toughest of the lot."

"He don't look so tough to me."

As the words were spoken Horn jerked his head around. Following his gaze, Kimball saw Dennie Mercer leaning against the fence. The kid was looking beyond Horn, watching one of the punchers go after the roan, rope swinging.

Horn's face got a trifle red, and he gave the kid a hard grin. "Maybe you'd like to climb aboard him, feller?"

"Yeah, I'll take a crack at him," Dennie said. His eyes met Kimball's and he smiled before slipping through the fence.

Rusty Noland came up beside Kimball, worry shadowing his face. "That's a pretty bad horse for that kid to be tackling, Boss."

"He asked for it, Rusty." Kimball kept his eyes on Dennie, watching him move toward the big roan. "Let's see what he can do."

Two of the punchers held the quivering horse until Dennie was in the saddle. When the kid said, "Let me have him!" they jumped back and ran for the fence. Rod Horn had a now-we're-going-to-see-something grin on his face as the horse came unwound. Dennie let out a whoop and raked the roan with his spurs. The horse shot up in the air, came down and went into a series of stiff-legged jumps. When that didn't work, the bronc tried twisting and sun-fishing, but Dennie Mercer, yelling and waving his hat, stayed with him.

The uneasiness left Noland's eyes and he said, "The kid can ride, Boss. The best I've seen since Joe Douglas."

"Joe was his teacher, Rusty," Kimball told him, and after a moment, he added, "I reckon the kid will make a hand."

Rod Horn wasn't grinning now. There was a surly expression on his face as he watched Dennie ride that bronc to a standstill. The rest of the crew cheered when the kid slid out of the saddle and came back to the fence, his shoulders squared, a faint swagger to his walk.

Kimball slapped him on the back. "Looks like you took all the fire out of him, Dennie."

"He wasn't so tough," Dennie said, and gave Horn a mocking glance.

The big man muttered something about fool's luck, and turned away.

When Dennie, along with the other hands, had ridden out to work the range, Kimball started up to the house to do some book work. Pushing a pencil and juggling a lot of figures around was something Kimball didn't like, but he had put this off as long as he could.

As he was about to step up on the front porch, the mutter of hooves reached him and, turning his head in the direction of town, he saw four riders coming along the trail. As they came closer Kimball recognized the man in the lead—Lake Stafford, Ernie's brother, and owner of the Diamond S, over in the foothills.

Apprehension touched Kimball, watching them ride toward him, and he started to reach for his gun. Then he swore softly, remembering that he had left the weapon in the house. Better go get it, he thought, and half turned. Oh hell, Lake wouldn't try anything here. So reasoning, Kimball changed his mind about going in the house. Uneasiness stayed with him, but he tried to keep it from showing on his face as the riders came to a halt in front of him.

LAKE STAFFORD leaned forward in the saddle, folded his thin hands over the horn, and looked at Kimball. There was nothing about Lake to tell that he was Ernie's brother. Nothing in his looks or his make-up. He didn't have Ernie's reckless streak nor his quick, hot temper. He was a gaunt man, about thirty-five, the skin stretching tightly over his high-boned face. There was strength in that face and in the flat line of his mouth. Lake was the kind of man, Kimball thought, who could be dangerous when he wanted to be.

"Me and the boys just came back from the cemetery." Stafford said in a low voice. "We laid Ernie away."

The men behind Stafford stared stonily at Kimball. He felt the weight of their eyes,

and he said, "Ernie was your brother, Lake, and I reckon you thought a heap of him, but he got out of line last night. He'd been itching for a long time to try me and he finally got the chance."

"It wasn't much of a chance, Kimball. From what I hear, the kid had been drinking and that slowed him down."

"Maybe you're right, Lake, but Ernie pulled a gun on me and I didn't have any choice."

"You could have taken his gun away from him, or you could have just winged him, but you wouldn't have got enough satisfaction out of that. You hadn't killed anybody in a couple of months, so you didn't want to pass up a good chance like that."

A muscle twitched on the left side of Kimball's face. "You better get on home, Lake. I don't like that kind of talk."

"And I don't like what you did to my kid brother." Stafford didn't raise his voice, but there was fire in his eyes and it was growing brighter. "Maybe he was a little headstrong, but he was all that ever meant a damn thing to me. And now he's dead, murdered!"

"Get going, Lake," Kimball said sharply.

One of the men behind Stafford shifted in the saddle, his hand dropping to the butt of a Colt .45. He said tonelessly, "We could take care of him right here, Boss. He's not wearing a gun, and there's nobody around—"

"That's where you're wrong, mister."

As the words were spoken behind him, the rider stiffened. He dropped his hand from his holster and turned slowly toward the barn. Looking in the same direction, Kimball felt some of the tension flow out of him, for Dennie Mercer stood at the corner of the barn, a rifle in his hands.

Stafford saw what he was up against, but there was no fear in his eyes; only hate. He said softly, "I've got a good memory, Kimball." And with that he reined his horse around and spurred out of the yard, his riders following.

When they were out of sight, Dennie came across the yard, the rifle cradled in his arms.

Kimball smiled at him. "Thought you rode out with the rest of the boys?"

"I did, but my horse threw a shoe and I came back. When I saw what was going on, I sneaked into the bunkhouse and got a rifle I saw there last night."

"You're all right, Dennie," Kimball said. "We're going to get along."

The kid ran his hand along the rifle barrel, a sheepish grin pulling at his lips. "To tell you the truth, I'm kind of glad they didn't start anything."

"Why, Dennie?"

"Because I can't hit the side of a barn with any kind of a shooting iron."

Kimball's eyes turned in the direction Stafford and his men had gone. "A man who can't handle a gun," he murmured, "don't usually last long in this country."

"I know that," Dennie said soberly. "And I'm aiming to do some practicing in my spare time. If I was just half as fast as you are, I'd be satisfied." He rubbed the barrel of the gun again, not looking at Kimball. "I was sort of hoping you'd help me get the hang of it."

"Why sure, Dennie, I'll show you. We'll start right in this afternoon."

During the next month, Kimball spent a great deal of time with Dennie Mercer, used up a lot of ammunition shooting at tin cans. Right from the first, Kimball could see that he had an apt pupil. There was speed in Dennie's slender hands and he caught on fast.

ONE Saturday afternoon out back of the barn, Kimball stood at a distance and watched the kid practice, nodding his approval when Dennie looked in his direction. As he saw the easy, effortless way the kid drew and fired, Kimball felt a glow of pride, but Rusty Noland, standing beside Kimball, had a worried look on his fleshy face.

Finally Noland said, "Dennie's changing, Boss. Maybe you haven't noticed it, but I have."

"In what way, Rusty?"

"He's trying to imitate you in everything he does. Walks like you and sits his saddle the same way, and now he's learning to use a gun like you. Maybe it kind of pleases you right now, but you're liable to be sorry one of these days."

Kimball made a wry face. "The kid's all right, Rusty. You worry too much."

"He was all right when he came here," Noland said gravely. "A likable young cuss just turned nineteen. But now he's getting a little hard to handle, going around with a chip on his shoulder most of the time."

"You're imagining things, Rusty. You remind me of some old woman."

"Maybe you're right, Boss," Noland said heavily. "But I've got a feeling that something bad is going to come out of this."

Noland walked away, heading toward the bunkhouse. Kimball stared after him a moment, frowning. Then he turned his attention to Dennie, watching the kid holster his weapon, then draw and fire at a target painted on the side of the barn. Kimball knew he could cover all five holes with the palm of his hand.

Dennie turned and looked at him, grinning as he blew smoke from his gun. "How am I doing, Shane?"

Kimball walked over and inspected the target. "You're not doing bad at all, kid."

"I got to do better," Dennie said, and started reloading, his face serious.

Kimball glanced toward the corral, saw that the boys were getting ready to ride into town, and wondered why he couldn't get Rusty Noland's words out of his mind.

Looking back at Dennie, he said, "This is Saturday. Why don't we ride into town and see what's doing?"

Dennie put his gun back in holster and glanced toward the target. "I'd kind of like to do a little more practicing, Shane. I can't seem to relax like you told me to."

"All you've been doing lately is practicing," Kimball said, smiling. "Forget it for awhile and let's have some fun."

Rusty Noland and the rest of the crew lit out, letting their mounts feel the spurs, eager to get to town. A little later, Kimball and Dennie followed, but held their horses at a slower pace. When they were halfway to town, they came upon the Jeffers' wagon, moving slowly along the trail, and Kimball passed a few words with Will Jeffers, a rancher who had a little ten-cow outfit over near Indian Springs.

"Why don't you come over for dinner some Sunday, Shane?" Jeffers asked when Kimball was about to ride on.

"I'll do that some time, Will," Kimball said, and glanced at Betty, the rancher's daughter. She was about eighteen, a starry-eyed girl, and it was common gossip that her father was trying to get her married off. The girl had nothing to say, but when Kimball's eyes touched her, she blushed and quickly turned her head.

After they had ridden on a ways, Kimball said, "There's a girl for you, Dennie. Right pretty little filly, too."

"It was you she was looking at all the time," Dennie said, scowling. Then his face brightened. "She's even prettier than that little waitress at the Star Café. How come you haven't corraled her by now?"

"Been too busy, I guess," Kimball said. "But I took her to a shindig one night. She cuts quite a nice figure on the dance floor."

Dennie stared at him, amusement in his eyes. "Did you kiss her?"

"You're too nosy," Kimball growled, and made a playful pass at him.

They rode awhile in silence and Kimball remembered how Lance Durfee had told him several times, "You need a wife, Shane. It's not right for a man to live without the love of a good woman."

But a man who has started from scratch and built up the biggest ranch in the country hadn't much time to spend with women. Besides, all those whom Kimball had met so far hadn't caused him to lose any sleep.

IV

REACHING Moderia, Kimball and Dennie found the usual Saturday crowd moving along the plank walks and in and out of stores. Wagons and buckboards lined the street, and kids were playing around the big water trough in the center of town, chasing one another and yelling like a bunch of wild Indians.

Kimball spied Lance Durfee in front of the general store and reined in when the lawman waved to him. After Dennie had been introduced, they talked for a few minutes, and then Dennie said, "Reckon I'll leave you two and have a look around."

"Sure, go ahead," Kimball said. "I'll see you later."

Durfee's eyes followed Dennie as the kid headed down the street. "He walks like you, Shane, and acts a lot like you, too. Full of salt and vinegar and don't care whether school keeps or not. That's the way you was ten years ago, and you haven't changed a hell of a lot."

"Now, let's not get started on that," Kimball said sourly. "I came to town to enjoy myself . . . What's new?"

"Nothing much, except that a feller hit town a little while ago claiming he passed a wagon train of emigrants headed this way."

A frown wrinkled Kimball's forehead. "You don't suppose they're figuring on stopping around here?"

"You never can tell, Shane."

"This part of the country never was meant to be plowed up." Kimball said flatly. "A few of them tried it, but they didn't last long."

Durfee regarded him soberly. "No, they knew they'd be damned fools to try to buck you, so they moved on. But you can't stop progress, Shane. Times are changing, and you'll live to see the day when there won't be any open ranges."

"You talk like a crazy man, Lance." Kimball made an impatient gesture. "There'll be cattle roaming on this range long after you and me both are dead and gone."

Durfee nodded. "But there'll be other folks besides cattlemen. You'll see farmers and they'll grow crops on part of the range. Mark my word, Shane. The days of the cattle kings is about done. Maybe it won't be these folks. Maybe you'll drive them out, but more will come and they'll keep on coming."

"We'll see about that," Kimball murmured. Then his face smoothed out and he said, "Come on down to Rossmyer's and I'll buy you a drink."

The lawman glanced that way, smiling. "Thanks, Shane. Maybe I'll take you up on it later. Right now I've got some work to do over at the office."

Kimball started toward the saloon, then suddenly remembered there were some things he needed at the store. Turning back, he went in, gave the storekeeper his order, and stayed to talk with the man for awhile. On the street again, Kimball took his time, looking in some of the windows. He saw Lake Stafford swinging down at the rack in front of the Star Café. Their eyes met and Kimball felt the impact of the man's cold stare. A touch of uneasiness came to Kimball, but he shrugged it off and walked on.

Why don't you have a showdown with him? a voice back in Kimball's head was whispering to him. It's coming sooner or later, so why take a chance on him shooting you from the rimrock some dark night? A few years ago, you'd have gone over and had it out with him. Now you let it pass.

He was still a half-block from the saloon when he saw several townsmen come swiftly through the batwings, and a moment later there was the flat report of a gun. Kimball began to move faster. His boys were in there, and one of them might be in trouble. Men were standing on the porch, looking over the swinging doors, and Kimball shouldered his way through them. He pushed inside and drew up, stopped by the scene that confronted him.

Dennie Mercer stood at the bar on widespread legs, a smoking gun in his hand. Al Henderson, another of Kimball's punchers, sat in the sawdust holding his left shoulder. Blood seeped through Henderson's fingers and his lips were pressed tight against the pain.

Kimball went forward, his boot heels striking the floor hard. Men turned to stare at him as he headed straight for Dennie. If the kid heard him, he didn't look around. Dennie's eyes were fastened on Rod Horn who stood a few feet from the wounded Al Henderson, his face dark with anger.

Dennie said flatly, "All right, Rod. You want to take up where Al left off?"

"You put that gun back in your holster," Horn told him. "And I might just do that."

KIMBALL had reached the bar then and he stepped in front of Dennie, his face stern. "All right, kid. Put it away."

Dennie hesitated. There was a half defiant expression in his eyes that angered Kimball, who said sharply, "I told you to put it up." And when Dennie had obeyed, Kimball asked, "Now, what's this all about?"

"Ask them." Dennie nodded toward Al Henderson and Rod Horn.

Rusty Noland, seated at a card table, spoke up. "Reckon Rod and Al was rawhiding the kid a little, Shane. One word led to another and the first thing I knew, the kid was at it."

"They been pouring it on me ever since I hit the Kicking K," Dennie said bitterly. "They started in on me as soon as I came in here, and I wasn't in the mood to take it."

Kimball shot an inquiring glance at Horn. "How about it, Rod?"

"We was just having a little fun," Horn growled. "But the kid couldn't take it. Al was full of bust-head and he never had a chance when the kid cut down on him. You better have a little talk with that younker, Shane, because one of these days he'll pull that gun on the wrong man and get himself killed."

Dennie stared at Horn from narrowed eyes. He muttered something under his breath, and Kimball swung back to face him.

"All right," Kimball said roughly. "Let's break it up." He gave the kid a long, searching look. "Dennie, if you want to live to be much older, don't be so quick to pull that iron."

Resentment flared in Dennie's eyes, but was quickly gone. Turning back to the bar, he reached for a half-filled glass of beer.

Kimball put his eyes on Horn, saying, "Rod, you and Jack take Al down to Doc Rogan's and get him patched up."

Horn hesitated, anger still bright in his eyes as he stared at Dennie.

"Come on, Rod," Henderson groaned. "Get me out of here before I bleed to death."

It was only a flesh wound, nothing serious, Kimball learned when he stopped by the doc's office a little while later. Al was sitting up and even managed to grin by the time Kimball left.

The rest of the boys were still at Rossmyer's, Dennie playing penny ante poker, when Kimball got his horse and rode out of town. As he headed toward the ranch, Kimball's face turned somber and he wondered if he had made a mistake in handling the kid the way he had.

Kimball had lived a rough kind of life ever since he could remember. His folks had been killed in a wagon train raid when he had been just a button. Since then he'd played a lone hand, never getting close to any man. Maybe that was why he had been attracted to Dennie, and the fact that Dennie had looked on him as an idol, had touched Kimball. Now he blamed himself for what had happened tonight, for the change in Dennie. Following in my footsteps, he thought, and swore softly.

The next morning, Kimball was getting into his clothes when he heard the rapid pound of hooves coming toward the ranch, but he didn't think much about it until Rusty Noland came running into the house a few minutes later. Kimball could tell by the set of his ramrod's face that something was wrong.

"What is it, Rusty?"

"Trouble, Boss. Bad trouble."

Kimball tucked his shirttail in, asking, "Dennie again?"

Noland shook his head. "Nesters. A whole damned wagon train of 'em! One of the boys just rode in to tell me they'd pitched camp on Squaw Creek."

"Lance told me yesterday there was a bunch headed this way, but I didn't think they'd stop here." Kimball reached for his gun-belt, face tight as he strapped it around his waist.

Noland stared at him. "You want to ride right away?"

"No use fooling around," Kimball said. "Have the boys saddle up."

"That'll make 'em happy," Noland said, grinning. "Things have been too peaceful lately. They've been itching for some excitement."

WITHOUT taking time to eat breakfast, Kimball strode down to the corral and saddled his black gelding. There was an air of excitement as the crew hustled about, cut-

ting out their horses and shoving rifles into their saddle scabbards. This was to their liking, Kimball knew. Men who worked on the Kicking K expected a little trouble now and then, and if they were afraid of it they didn't last long.

Kimball swung up, impatience stirring in him as he waited for Rod Horn to finish saddling. The others were ready and waiting. Kimball's eyes went to Dennie Mercer. Seeing the eagerness in the kid's eyes, Kimball frowned.

Then they were riding, Kimball leading the way across the flats, through grass that was green and wet with morning dew. They passed cattle that were sleek and fat and carried the Kicking K brand on their flanks, part of the vast herd Shane Kimball had built up. Thousands of them roamed this rich graze, the land that Kimball had fought to hold, land that had never known a plow and never would, he thought grimly. Not as long as he could use a gun.

An hour later they swept up a cedar-spotted ridge and when they reached the crest, Kimball called a halt. That was Squaw Creek down there below and Kimball could see an old rattle-trap wagon parked in a bend of the stream. There were other wagons farther down, and the wind carried to him the smell of campfires.

After a moment, Kimball rode on, sitting straight in the saddle, his face hard as stone, and his men behind him. They splashed across the creek, heading toward the nearest wagon. A long-eared hound dog came out to bark at them, but retreated when a man spoke firmly from beside a small fire.

He was a cotton-headed man, tall and a trifle stooped, and wore flat-heeled shoes, the sight of which caused Kimball's lips to twitch. The man's overalls were old and faded, but they were clean. He looked at Kimball, squared his shoulders, and said, "Morning."

Kimball nodded, and the thought came to him that here was a man who looked old and tired; a man who had worked hard and found the going rough. Under his breath, Kimball cursed, telling himself he hadn't got where he was by feeling sorry for people.

Folding his hands over the horn, he looked at the man narrowly, and he said, "I'm Shane Kimball, and this is my range you're camping on. If you're just figuring on staying long enough to rest up, you're welcome."

The man by the fire faced him squarely and spoke in a level voice.

"My name is Dan Patten. My boy, Ben, is out gathering wood, and them are my two daughters you see looking out of the wagon, Norma on the right and Stella on the left."

Kimball laid a brief glance on the wagon, saw that the girls had lifted the canvas top and were staring at him, Norma with a curious, steady gaze and Stella with a heavy-lidded boldness.

Dan Patten was saying, "We've come a long ways, Mr. Kimball, me and my friends down the creek there. They've looked to me for guidance and I led 'em here where I'd heard there was good water and the kind of soil that will grow crops."

Kimball shook his head. "You've come to the wrong place, Patten. This is cattle country, and it's going to stay that way."

"There's plenty of land here," Patten said patiently. "More'n you need for your cattle."

"I can't let you stay." Kimball's voice was firm. "If I do, more will come and they'll string wire for my cattle to get tangled up in. They'll plow up that grass and use the water I need."

Patten rubbed his hands slowly on the legs of his overalls. "I reckon you're a big man around here, Mr. Kimball, and I don't expect you to take to something like this kindly, but we won't cause you any trouble. We're good, steady people and we'll raise crops here, produce things you need."

"Be gone by sundown," Kimball said flatly.

Dan Patten stared at him unflinchingly. "No, we're staying. We're not gunmen, but we can fight if we have to."

"You won't stand a chance," Kimball told him.

"Well see about that," another voice said, and Kimball's eyes whipped to a brush clump, saw the shine of a rifle barrel and watched it swing toward him. Instinctively, he drew and fired. He saw the man with the rifle take a few staggering steps forward.

"Ben!" Dan Patten said in a whisper.

V

BEN PATTEN was a skinny, thin-faced youngster, not over twenty. Seeing this, Kimball cursed himself for being so hasty. He stared numbly while Norma Patten, with a sharp cry, jumped down from the wagon and ran to her brother's side.

Kimball had his first good look at the girl and he felt his breath catch in his throat. She was small and slender and there was no hiding the fact that she was a woman even though she wore linsey-woolsey trousers and a man's flannel shirt. But it was her face that held Kimball and brought to life in him something strange and new. It wasn't a beautiful face, but it reflected something that went beyond beauty, something that Kimball couldn't put into words.

There was blood on Ben Patten's right shoulder. It stained through his patched blue shirt and dripped into the dirt. The boy's face was the color of weak milk, his lips clamped hard against the pain, but he stared defiantly at Kimball. Norma knelt beside him for a moment, then twisted her head and looked up at Kimball, her brown eyes filled with a scorn that made him wince.

"You must be pretty proud of yourself, mister. You with a small army to back you up, picking on an old man and a boy."

"He was drawing a bead on me," Kimball said defensively.

"Get out!" the girl cried bitterly. "Get out and leave us alone!"

Kimball's stomach felt as if the bottom had dropped out of it, and he was unable to meet Norma Patten's accusing stare. Reining his horse around sharply, he spoke in a rough voice.

"Let's go, boys."

When they were back at the ranch, Rod Horn spoke to no one in particular. "If you ask me, we should have seen 'em on their way."

"Nobody's asking you, Rod," Kimball said sharply.

Horn stiffened, something mean flashing in his eyes, but it was gone quickly, and he walked away.

Rusty Noland pulled the saddle off his bay and hung it on the fence. He looked at Kimball, wet his lips, and said, "They won't be gone by sundown, Boss."

"They better be," Kimball said, and strode out of the corral.

He went down to the cook shack and tried to eat breakfast, but the food didn't taste as it should. He kept thinking of the girl and remembering that she had stirred him in a way that no other woman ever had. The coffee was hot and he drank three cups, but he couldn't get Norma Patten out of his mind.

He stayed close to the house the rest of the day, prowling through the rooms, restless and irritable. Time dragged and he kept glancing at his watch. Finally he went onto the porch and watched the sun dropping from sight, painting the sky with orange and purple. He looked toward the bunhouse and knew that his men were there, guns oiled and ready to ride. They had done it before and Kimball had led them, and afterward he had felt no regret. What was he waiting for now?

Dennie Mercer came riding in and seeing Kimball on the porch, turned his mount in that direction.

"I've been over to Squaw Creek, Shane, waiting to see what they were going to do. It's plain they're not figuring on leaving, so I guess we'll have to see to it that they do."

The eagerness in the kid angered Kimball, and he said roughly, "Better unsaddle and get your supper."

"But you said sundown—".

"I know what I said, but I'm letting it ride for awhile."

Dennie stared at him with his mouth half-open. He looked as if he had been up to something and then had the props kicked from under him.

"There's no rush," Kimball said, and he sounded as if he were trying to convince himself. "That boy I plugged is in no shape to travel right now."

"He's a damned nester," Dennie said hotly.

"Reckon nesters are human the same as anybody else," Kimball murmured, and felt the kid's eyes searching his face.

After a moment, Dennie said, "You sure

don't sound like the fire-eating gent that Joe Douglas used to tell me about."

KIMBALL let that pass and glanced toward the cook shack. "Better get your supper, Dennie, before the cook throws it out."

"I've lost my appetite," Dennie said, and spoke to his mount, riding slowly, stiffly toward the corral.

Kimball sat on the porch and smoked awhile, the restlessness growing in him as darkness came on. A lamp was lighted in the bunkhouse and he stared at it, thinking of his crew and of the talk that he knew was going on down there. They wouldn't be able to understand the way he was acting, and a wry smile touched his lips as he thought. Hell, I can't even understand it myself.

When the moon came up, Kimball went to the corral and saddled his black gelding. Without a word to anyone, he rode out, turning toward Squaw Creek. He tried to tell himself it was the boy he had shot that he was concerned about, but he knew it was the girl who was drawing him. He wanted to see her again.

On the bank of the creek, he stopped and stared across the water, conscious of his pulses' rapid beat. A small fire was burning, causing shadows to dance on the dirty gray canvas of the wagon. He heard Dan Patten say something, but was unable to make out what it was. That odd, dry feeling came to Kimball's mouth again, and he had a sudden urge to turn back. Then his lips flattened stubbornly and he put his horse into the creek.

He was going up the opposite bank when a flurry of movement caught his attention. The girl spoke sharply from a willow thicket.

"You've come far enough, mister."

Norma Patten stepped into the moonlight, a rifle in her hands, the barrel pointed at his chest. Her lips were tight and the gun didn't waver. Kimball thought, it wouldn't take much to get her to kill me, and felt no anger. He kept his hand away from his gun, saying, "I didn't come looking for trouble."

"Your kind is always looking for trouble." The girl's voice was heavy with scorn. "You gave us till sundown, and now you're back to see why we haven't gone. Your gunmen are over there across the creek somewhere, waiting to back you up."

"There's nobody with me. I came to tell you that you and your friends can stay."

Norma glanced across the creek, her eyes filled with suspicion, the rifle still held firmly in her hands.

"I came alone," Kimball said.

Her eyes came back to his face, searching. "You can't make me believe you've had a change of heart, not after the way you talked and acted this morning, and ended up by shooting my brother."

Kimball wet his lips, a sense of helplessness gripping him.

There was the light sound of footsteps and Stella Patten said, "Put the gun up, Norma. Mr. Kimball is trying to be nice to us."

The other girl was standing a few feet to the left of her sister. The moon lay its soft light upon her, and Kimball got his first good look at Stella Patten. She was two or three years older than Norma, about twenty-two, Kimball judged. She was prettier than Norma, at least in a way that would appeal to some men. Her body beneath a thin cotton dress looked firm and shapely. There was sultryness about her and boldness in her green eyes, but Kimball found lacking a certain inner quality that he had discovered in Norma.

Stella Patten stood there looking up at Kimball, a soft smile on her red lips.

Norma did not look at her sister, but she said, "Don't let him fool you. He's got something up his sleeve. Something—"

A groan came from the wagon and Norma glanced in that direction, concern driving the caution from her eyes.

"It's Ben," Stella said quickly. "You'd better see about him."

Norma looked at Kimball, undecided for a moment. Bitterness still rimmed her lips, but she lowered the rifle and, turning, ran quickly toward the wagon.

"I hope you'll forgive my sister." Stella ran her hands slowly over the flare of her hips, and Kimball couldn't help being aware of how the skimpy dress clung to her.

"I can't blame her for being sore," Kimball said. "How is your brother?"

"It was only a flesh wound, but he's lost a lot of blood."

"I'll ride into town and have the doc come out and take a look at him," Kimball offered.

STELLA PATTEN came up close to him, smiling warmly.

"You're very kind, Mr. Kimball."

Kimball shifted in the saddle, feeling uncomfortable in her presence. "It's the least I can do," he muttered, "after what happened."

"Come over any time," Stella said softly. "And don't think too badly of us because of the way Norma acted."

Kimball glanced toward the wagon, hoping to see Norma again, but she was out of sight. His eyes returned briefly to Stella, and he said, "Good night," and rode away without looking back.

An hour later, Kimball rode into Moderia, pulled up in front of Doc Rogan's office, and swung down. The place was dark, but Kimball rapped, thinking the medico might be in bed. When he failed to get an answer, he mounted and rode down to Rossmyer's saloon. Dennie Mercer's paint was at the tie-rail, and Kimball frowned, wondering what had brought the kid to town.

There weren't over a dozen people in the saloon, most of them townsmen, but Kimball saw Lake Stafford nursing a drink at the end of the bar. The man turned, something mean filling his eyes as he looked at Kimball. Ignoring Stafford, Kimball ran his eyes quickly around the room. Dr. Paul Rogan was playing cards with two other men at a corner table. Dennie Mercer leaned against the wall, idly watching the game, and giving no indication that he had seen Kimball come in.

Crossing the room, Kimball stopped beside the card table. "Cash in your chips, Doc. I've got some business for you."

Paul Rogan, a slender young man in his late twenties, glanced up. "Just when I'm starting to win," he said, and looked a little unhappy. Then a faint grin tugged at his lips. "What is it, Shane? One of your boys get shot up again?"

"No, it's somebody else, Doc."

Dennie Mercer pushed away from the wall, his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt, his eyes pinned on Kimball's face. "Why don't you tell everybody who it is you want patched up, Shane?" Dennie said tauntingly.

It was suddenly quiet in the room and Kimball knew that every man there was watching him. Anger began to nudge Kimball, and he said, "You've got no business in town, Dennie. You ought to be in bed."

Resentment pulled at the kid's lips. "I go to bed when I please, and get up the same way."

"Talking kind of tough, ain't you, Dennie?"

"Maybe. I thought I was working for a tough outfit, but I found out different today when you backed down before those plow-pushers. You're supposed to be a real bad hombre, but when you winged one of them nester boys, you got to feeling so sorry about it you've come all the way to town to get him a doctor." Dennie paused, contempt etched on his lips as he slowly shook his head. "Maybe you was tough once, but you've sure turned soft."

VI

FURY boiled over in Kimball. Without thinking, he leaped forward and slapped Dennie Mercer hard across the face, the blow popping like a pistol shot. Dennie staggered back, his mouth jerking, the marks of Kimball's fingers standing out on his face. His hand fell to the butt of his gun, but he did not draw the weapon. There was a hot resentment in his eyes as he stared at Kimball.

Kimball felt the anger draining out of him and regret moving in to take its place. He wanted to tell Dennie he was sorry, but the words wouldn't come out. What he said was, "You've got a lot to learn, kid."

"Then I'll learn it from somebody else." Dennie's voice was ragged.

Kimball shrugged. "Suit yourself, Dennie, but you better think it over."

"The Diamond S could use a good hand, and we're not a bunch of nester-lovers, either."

The sound of Lake Stafford's voice pulled Kimball around and anger came back with

a rush. Stafford was standing at the end of the bar, faint mockery in his eyes.

Dennie put his shoulders back, looked defiantly at Kimball, then turned to Stafford. "You've just hired yourself a rider, mister."

Stafford smiled, the mockery in his eyes growing brighter. A flush crawled up Kimball's neck and he felt the heat in his face. Fists knotted, he started across the room, but the sound of Doc Rogan's voice stopped him.

"We'd better get going, Shane. I'd like to get to bed some time tonight."

Kimball stood there, indecision tugging at him, and stared at Stafford a moment longer. Then he relaxed.

"All right, Doc. Let's go."

While Rogan went down to the office to get his bag, Kimball stopped at the livery stable and saddled the medico's horse. Five minutes later, they were riding out of town heading toward Squaw Creek.

After a little while, Rogan said, "I've known you for a long time, Shane. I've dug a few bullets out of you and I've tried to patch up some of the men you've shot. You never seemed to be concerned about them before."

Kimball stared off into the darkness, his eyes moody. "I don't understand it, Doc. Something has happened to me. I'm worried about that kid back there in the saloon. I figure I made him what he is."

"How's that, Shane?"

"He'd been led to believe I was a holy terror. That's how come him to sign on with me. He acted like he thought I was a little tin god or something. But this morning, I didn't measure up the way he figured I ought to, and it kind of set him back on his heels. He's not bad, Doc, but right at the age where it wouldn't take much to set him on the wrong road."

"Don't blame yourself, Shane. A man makes his own bed."

"I made mine, Doc. I wanted to grow big and I didn't care how many I stepped on to get there. But now—" Kimball spread his hands.

Rogan stared at him a moment, then said, "A man can change, Shane. I know. When I came back from medical school, I didn't intend to stay in Moderia. I wanted to go to some big city and hang out my shingle, but Dad was in bad health and he talked me into staying until he died. I didn't want to end up just a small town doctor like Dad, and I kept telling myself that in a little while I would leave."

"But your dad's been dead about three years, now, Doc, and you're still here."

"Yes, and I'll be here the rest of my life. I've learned something in those three years, Shane. I've learned there's other folks in the world besides myself. I've doctored them and helped them have their babies, and I've found out those people I'd never given any thought to before were human beings, too. They had their problems and they were pretty important to them." Rogan stopped talking, a faint smile on his lips as he looked at Kimball. "Does that make sense, Shane?"

"A lot of sense, Doc," Kimball said soberly. "But I reckon most folks can't see it because they get so wrapped up in their own little worlds."

THEY rode in silence after that and when finally they came in sight of the Patten wagon, Kimball drew up.

"I'll leave you here, Doc. Do what you can and send me the bill."

Rogan shook his head. "It's hard to believe you're letting these folks stay here on your land, Shane."

"Reckon I did some thinking along the lines you mentioned a while ago, Doc." Kimball stared across the creek, not looking at the medico. "Only in my case, it was a girl who helped give me a different slant on things."

"A girl?" Rogan's eyebrows lifted.

Kimball lifted the reins. "Good night, Doc. I'll see you around."

It was a long time before Kimball went to sleep that night. He lay in his bed tossing, unable to get Dennie Mercer out of his mind. The next morning, he was in no mood for company, so he waited until the crew tramped out of the cook shack before going down for his breakfast. Most of the boys were at the corral when Kimball went by, and Rod Horn stepped out to face him.

"You can give me my time, Shane," Horn

said sourly. "I'm drifting on."

Kimball felt the stares of the others, but he kept looking at the big fellow. "What's wrong, Rod?" he asked mildly.

"Nothing's wrong with me." Horn's face had a surly cast to it. "I signed on here because I heard it was a tough outfit, one where a feller might get to use a few shells now and then. I didn't figure to sit around twiddling my thumbs."

"A *muy malo hombre,* eh?" There was faint derision in Kimball's tone.

Horn glanced at the rest of the crew, saw that they were watching, and put his eyes back on Kimball. "I just don't like the way them nesters smell."

"Meaning that I do?" Kimball asked softly.

Horn shrugged. "Take it any way you like."

Kimball stepped forward and drove his right fist into Rod Horn's mouth, a powerful blow that knocked the big man off his feet and dropped him in the dust. He struggled up to his knees and remained in that position for a moment, shaking his head as if to clear away the fog. Then he got to his feet, cursing and moved toward Kimball.

"I'll show you how tough I am," Horn said between his teeth.

"Talk's cheap, Rod," Kimball told him, and stood there, his fists cocked and ready.

Horn put his head down between his shoulders and rushed in. Kimball hammered him about the face, hard blows that ripped the skin on Horn's cheeks, but they didn't stop him, didn't keep him from pounding his own fists into Kimballs belly. The blows hurt, but Kimball took them without backing up. They stood toe to toe and slugged each other, the thud of their fists causing Rusty Noland to wince as he stood beside the corral and looked on.

Rod Horn gave the best that was in him, but it wasn't good enough to put Kimball down, and at last it was Horn who gave ground, his boots stirring the dust as he staggered back. Kimball went after him, a taunting grin on his lips.

"What are you waiting, for Rod?"

Muttering an oath, Horn put his head down again and lunged forward. Too late Kimball read the man's intentions. Horn's head struck him in the chest and the weight of Horn's body forced him to the ground. He tried to roll away, but Horn was on top of him, panting, trying to grind a thumb into Kimball's left eye.

Finally Kimball got his right arm free, grasped Horn's wrist and twisted until the big man had to roll away to break the hold. He scrambled to his feet, face shiny with sweat, and aimed the toe of his boot at Kimball's head. Grabbing the man's foot, Kimball threw him off-balance, and before Horn could come in again, Kimball was on his feet. He ripped a left into Horn's face and sent him reeling. When Kimball went after him, Horn brought his knee up, attempting to drive it into Kimball's middle, but Kimball, that cold grin back on his lips, twisted aside.

ONCE more Rod Horn tried to use his fists, but his blows lacked the steam they had carried at first. He began to retreat, his breath coming hard and fast, and the crew backed away and gave him room. When Horn's back was against the fence and he could go no farther, Kimball stepped in and punished him with one sledge-hammer blow after another. Horn's arms dropped to his sides and he began to slide down the fence, a stupid expression on his face.

There was dust on Kimball's face. His knuckles were skinned and hurting as he stepped back and looked at the crew, his eyes touching each man.

"Any of the rest of you boys don't like the way I'm running things?"

They began to shift uneasily, but Al Henderson, his arm in a sling, spoke up. "I'm not looking for what Rod got, Shane, but I reckon I'll be moving on."

"What's eating you?" Kimball snapped.

Henderson wet his lips. "No hard feelings, Shane, but looks like all you're going to need around here from now on is a bunch of plain everyday cowpunchers. And me—well, I figure I'd go loco doing nothing but ride fence or play nursemaid to a lot of cows."

Kimball looked at the others, the anger in him subsiding. "If the rest of you boys feel

the same way, speak up."

A tall Texan pushed his hat back, grinning. "Reckon I'll stick around a spell and see what happens."

"You can count me in," another man said.

"Me, too," said a third one. "It won't be too dull working for a feller that can throw his fists like you did a few minutes ago."

"You boys who are staying better get to work," Kimball said crisply. "The rest of you pack your warbags and I'll go up and make out your checks."

Rod Horn was getting to his feet, swaying unsteadily. He braced himself against the fence and stared at Kimball, his eyes narrow and full of malice. Ignoring him, Kimball started toward the house.

Rusty Noland fell in beside him, saying, "Looks like we're going to be a little short-handed, Boss."

"We can hire plenty of punchers," Kimball answered.

"Sure. I'm not worried, Shane, but I don't know what to make of the way you're acting. Not sick, are you?"

"Never felt better, Rusty."

Noland grinned. "I never used to believe in miracles, but I do now."

They went into the house and Noland waited beside the roll-top desk while Kimball made out the checks.

Finally the ramrod said, "This house is a hell of a looking place. What it needs is a woman's touch, like some lace curtains at the windows to brighten things up."

Kimball laid the pen down and looked up at him inquiringly. "Now what brought that up?"

"Been doing some thinking since we was over to that nester camp yesterday." Noland shifted his chew of tobacco to the other cheek. "I saw the way you was eying that one little gal. You looked like somebody had hit you between the eyes with a sledge-hammer."

A faint smile caught at Kimball's lips. "You're imagining things, Rusty. Better take these checks out and pay those fiddle-footed rannihans off."

"All right, Boss." Noland picked up the checks and turned toward the door. Then he stopped and looked back, his face serious. "Just want you to know I'm with you all the way, Shane. We've been through a lot together, seen some lean days and some fat ones. We've played poker, drunk whisky, and raised a good deal of hell, but now if you're ready to settle down, so am I."

"Thanks, Rusty," Kimball said quietly.

VII

AN HOUR later, Shane Kimball started outside and stopped on the porch, his eyes squinted against the sun glare as he watched a rider coming from the direction of Squaw Creek. It was a girl, and Kimball's heart began to beat faster. Then she was closer and he knew disappointment for it was Stella, not Norma, as he had hoped.

Stella Patten rode up to the porch, sitting astraddle of an old sway-backed mare, and wearing the same thin cotton dress he remembered from the night before. Sitting the saddle like a man had hiked the dress up high on her legs, but she didn't seem to be bothered about it.

"Hello," she said, and made no attempt to pull the dress down.

"Hello," Kimball said, and found it hard to remain calm before her boldness. "How's your brother?"

"Much better this morning. I thought you'd like to know, so I rode over." A soft smile was on her lips as she stared at him. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"Sure," Kimball said, and stepped off the porch to help her down. "The house is in pretty much of a mess, though."

"I don't mind," Stella answered, and without waiting for him to lead the way, she crossed the porch and stepped inside.

Kimball shot a glance toward the bunkhouse and felt relief when he saw no one in sight. Entering the living room, he found Stella standing in the center of the floor, hands on her hips as she looked about. Kimball rolled a smoke, his fingers none too steady, while Stella made a quick tour of inspection through the rest of the house.

When she came back to the living room, Kimball asked casually, "How's your sister? Does she still think I'm as mean as ever?"

Stella laughed lightly. "Norma's suspicious of all men," she said, and surveyed the living room again, her face turning serious. "You have a lovely house, Mr. Kimball. I've always wanted a big place like this."

"Maybe you'll have one some day."

"Not at the rate I'm going." Bitterness touched her eyes. "All I'll ever have is a shack, full of bawling kids, and a husband who comes home from the fields too tired to take me any place. Washing, ironing, mending, wearing the same old clothes year in, year out, and eating corn meal mush three times a day. It's not much to look forward to."

Kimball stared at her. "You make it sound pretty bad."

Stella said heavily, "It's worse than it sounds, but it's the life of a farmer and a farmer's wife, the only life I've ever known. We've lived in a dozen places and it's always the same. Listening to my father talk and say how next year things will be better. And next year it doesn't rain and the crops die. It killed my mother, made her old before her time. She used to tell me about the big house she lived in before she met my father, the nice clothes she had; the parties and dances she went to—" She broke off and looked up at Kimball as if she just remembered he was in the room. "I'm sorry I got started on that," she said, and gave him a brief smile of apology.

"It's all right," Kimball told her, and turned to put his cigarette out in an ash tray.

When he looked back at Stella, she was moving toward him, her eyes pinned on his face. "How come you've never got married, Mr. Kimball?"

"Reckon it's because nobody would have me," he said, grinning, and then sobered, shifting uneasily as she continued to come toward him.

"Don't kid me, mister." Stella's eyes never left his face. "You've got everything. You're big and strong and handsome."

Close to him she stopped, her head tilted up, her eyes half-closed. Kimball was aware of the pulse beat in her throat, the rise and fall of her breasts. He swallowed hard and wondered if she could hear the way his heart was banging against his ribs.

"Don't you want to kiss me, Kimball?" Stella's voice wasn't much more than a whisper.

HE LOOKED down at her red lips, parted just a little, and then the sound of hoof beats drew his attention. Turning, he crossed to the window and looked out.

"Somebody coming," he said.

Stella peered over his shoulder, muttering softly, "Now what's he doing here?"

"A friend of yours?" Kimball asked.

"Ed Norris. One of the farmers in our wagon train. He wants to marry me."

"Well, we better go out and meet him." Kimball turned toward the door, but Stella laid her hand on his arm, and suddenly she was closer, pressing her body against his. "Tell Ed I'm not here, Mr. Kimball. I'll stay out of sight till he's gone."

Kimball shook his head. "It wouldn't work. Your horse is in the yard."

"All right," Stella said regretfully. "But there'll be another time. I'll come back." She paused, then added, "You want me to, don't you?"

"No, you'd better not. Ed probably wouldn't like it."

"To hell with Ed! Oh, he's all right to have around, but you can't have any fun with him." She stared at Kimball searchingly. "Are you afraid of me?"

"Maybe I am."

Kimball pulled away from her and crossed to the door. Ed Norris was riding slowly into the yard when Stella and Kimball stepped out on the porch. Norris, a blocky, red-faced man about Kimball's age, wore bib overalls and heavy-soled shoes. Reining in, he stared at them uncertainly.

Stella looked at him, resentment in her eyes. "Well, have you started following me, Ed?"

"I wasn't following you, Stella." Norris' face had turned even redder. "Norma sent me to look for you. She wants you to stay with Ben while she helps Dan pull some logs down from the hills."

Kimball felt uncomfortable. Stella glanced at him, smiled, and said, "Mr. Kimball, this is Ed Norris."

Norris nodded but made no move to dis-

mount. He don't like this setup, Kimball thought. And I can't blame him.

When Stella was in the saddle, she looked down at Kimball, smiling warmly. "I hope you'll come over to see us."

"Thanks," Kimball said, and was glad when they rode away.

After supper, Kimball sat on the porch awhile, smoking and watching the shadows march down the timbered slopes of the mountains. A soft breeze came up and carried to him the smell of pine. Rusty Noland stepped out of the barn, followed by two of the punchers, and headed toward the bunkhouse. Part of their talk drifted up to Kimball.

"I was over to Squaw Creek," one of the men said. "Them nesters are working like beavers, even the womenfolks. Already they've got a couple of cabins about finished."

The men entered the bunkhouse and a lamp came to life, making yellow squares of the windows. Kimball threw his cigarette into the yard and sat there watching the red tip until it winked out.

He thought, I wonder if she'd be a little nicer to me now if I rode over there? Then his face turned somber. Better give her a little more time, feller. Remember, you shot her brother, and she's not going to forget it over night. She's not like Stella."

An hour later, Kimball went to the corral, saddled his gelding, swung aboard, and headed toward Squaw Creek. He told himself that he wouldn't try to see the girl, that he would just ride out and have a look at the cattle. But he kept riding in the direction of the nester camp, taking his time and listening to the wind whisper through the tall grass. A big yellow moon climbed into the sky and he wondered why he had never paid much attention to the moon before.

Then his thoughts turned to Dennie Mercer, and a sense of guilt took hold of Kimball. Dennie wasn't dry behind the ears, but he knew how to handle a gun and that could get him into a lot of trouble. The kid needed someone to keep a close rein on him. Hanging around a man like Lake Stafford would be bad for him.

And the cattleman thought, If it hadn't been for you, Kimball, the kid might be home with his folks. You helped make him what he is.

SELF-BLAME shadowed Kimball's eyes, then suddenly he hipped around in saddle, apprehension touching him as he stared along his back trail. No one was in sight, yet Kimball had the feeling that he was being followed. There was a gully back there, deep enough to hide a man on horseback. He swore softly, telling himself he was imagining things, and rode on. Still he was unable to shake off that vague sense of uneasiness.

Presently the trail dipped down, skirting a grove of quaking aspen, slender-bodied little trees with the moonlight silvering their yellow leaves. It was dark back in the grove and Kimball felt his tension mounting. Then something sang close to his head and he heard the flat report of a rifle. He quit the saddle in a hurry, hit the ground rolling while another bullet searched for him and went on, making a sharp, disappointed sound in the night.

Kimball's eyes raked the darkness, found a dry wash off to his left, and ran toward it. Another bullet came screaming out of the trees and this one found him, burned a hot path along his right side. He went down, groaning as his knee struck a rock. Lips clamped tight against the pain in his side, he staggered up and made a dive for the protection of the dry wash.

Down behind the bank, he hunkered for a moment, fighting off a wave of dizziness. When it passed, he crawled back up the bank, peered cautiously over the edge. The rifle spoke again and Kimball saw the flash. He raised his gun, then lowered it as he realized the distance was too great for a six-shooter.

Kimball stared down the weed-choked gully, remembering that farther down it turned and came close to the aspen grove. With one hand pressed against his side, his gun in the other, he worked his way along the sandy bottom of the wash until he was close to the stand of timber. Bent low, he climbed the bank and ducked into the trees, moving warily among them.

The pain in his side was growing steadily

worse, and once he was forced to stop and grab hold of one of the trees to keep from going down. The moonlight didn't reach here and he thought, Damn this fighting in the dark.

He moved on, a step at a time, his ears strained for a sound that would tell him the ambusher's whereabouts. Then it came, a faint whisper up there ahead of him. Was it Stafford? Had the man sat and brooded and let the hate eat so deep that he could wait no longer? It could be, but somehow Kimball didn't think Stafford would do it this way.

Blood had soaked through Kimball's shirt and he could feel the sweat on his face, cold sweat, but he didn't stop. He had to get closer and he had to hurry because his legs wouldn't hold him up much longer. Just a little farther, a little more to the left. The fellow was hunkered there at the edge of the trees, the rifle in his hands, staring toward the dry wash. Just a shadowy shape in the darkness.

Kimball edged a little nearer, and then his boot came down on a twig, the sound of it snapping loud in the silence. The ambusher whirled around, trying to get the rifle in line, but he never made it. Kimball fired twice and heard the fellow cry out as the second bullet hit him. He staggered out of the trees and into a little patch of moonlight. The rifle slipped from his hands and he fell to the ground.

VIII

WINCING from his efforts, Kimball went slowly forward, and looked down at the man he had shot.

"Never figured it might be you, Rod," he growled. "So that licking stuck in your craw?"

Horn lay on his back, his chest rising and falling rapidly. He looked up at Kimball and wet his lips, muttering, "You showed me up in front of the boys, and I couldn't forget it."

"So you hung around close to the ranch and waited till I rode out?"

"Yeah."

"You're a damned fool, Rod. How bad are you hit?"

"I've got no more'n a minute. Go on and leave me alone."

"You're not afraid to die, Rod?"

"Hell, no. I've had my fun. Figure it's better to cash in while you're young than to end up swamping out some saloon in your old age."

Kimball lifted his head, listening to the distant sound of gunfire coming from the direction of Squaw Creek. For a moment, he stared thoughtfully into the darkness, and when he looked back at Rod Horn, the man lay still, unmoving.

"I'll send somebody back for you, Rod," Kimball murmured, and knew he was talking to a dead man.

He found his horse and managed to pull himself into saddle. The rattle of guns was still in his ears as he rode toward the sound, weaving, half out of his head. It was not until the gelding was splashing through the cold waters of Squaw Creek that Kimball realized he had reached the stream. The sound of gunfire was close now, and dimly he heard a man yell. Then the shooting ceased and hooves drummed into the darkness. Kimball was too far gone now to pay much attention.

The gelding came out of the water and, as the horse started up the bank, Kimball lost his balance and tumbled out of saddle. He lay on the hard ground, his head spinning and a roaring in his ears. The horse stopped a few feet away, turned his head and stared at Kimball. Somehow Kimball got his feet under him and, staggering over to the animal, grasped the horn, but was too weak to pull himself up.

A voice lashed at him out of the darkness, "Stand still, and don't try to reach for your gun!"

Kimball let go of the horn and twisted around, trying to focus his eyes. It sounded like a woman's voice, but he wasn't sure. He wasn't sure of anything, for darkness was closing in on him. . . .

When Kimball came to, he was lying on a bed that had been made on the ground. It was still night and a fire burned brightly not far away. Moving his eyes, he saw the Pat-

ten wagon and realized where he was. He heard the sound of light footsteps and Norma came into his range of vision. She knelt beside him and Kimball closed his eyes while she put her hand against his forehead. Her fingers were soft and cool. He forgot the pain for a moment, opened his eyes and looked up at her. When she saw that he was awake, she stiffened and moved away.

Kimball frowned, saying, "I heard some shooting."

Norma regarded him with a withering scorn in her eyes. "I knew you had something up your sleeve. Telling us we could stay, then sneaking up on us in the dark. You should be real proud of yourself."

"You've got it figured wrong, miss."

Norma's voice was bitter. "Don't try to lie out of it. No, you didn't bother *us* this time, but you shot one of our neighbors, burned his wagon and ran off his stock. But it looks like you ran into a little trouble yourself."

"I was shot before I got here," Kimball tried to explain. "A feller bushwacked me, then I heard the shooting and came over to see what was up."

"He's lying, Sis," a voice said from the wagon. "Don't listen to him."

"Never mind, Ben," Norma said. "You go on back to sleep." She looked back at Kimball, indecision in her eyes. "Don't talk any more." Her voice was more gentle now. "Dad's gone after the doctor. He ought to be here before long."

"I've got to talk," Kimball said stubbornly. "I want you to believe it wasn't me pulled that raid. If it had been, do you think my boys would have gone off and left me?"

"I don't know."

"It stands to reason they wouldn't."

"Then who did do it?" Norma asked skeptically.

KIMBALL shook his head. "There are other cattlemen around here besides me."

"But we're on your land," she reminded him.

"Yes." Kimball's eyes turned thoughtful. "But I know one man that's not above doing something like this. He could have done it, hoping to put the blame on me."

Norma turned away and put more wood on the fire. Kimball watched her, liking the way the firelight touched her hair. He thought, I wish I could see her smile once, then winced as pain stabbed through his side. He lay there, lips tight against his teeth, until it passed.

Presently Norma returned and examined his wound, frowning as if she didn't like the looks of it.

Kimball asked casually, "Where's your sister?"

Norma changed the bandage, not looking at him. "Stella's down at Ed Norris' place. She and Ed are engaged."

"Are you engaged?"

"No."

"I'm glad of that," Kimball said, and tried hard to smile.

Her eyes touched him, but she didn't return the smile. "Stop talking and rest."

Dan Patten and Dr. Paul Rogan rode up an hour later. Rogan dismounted quickly, untied his bag from the saddle-horn, and came over to Kimball. When Rogan had made a hasty examination of the wound, he looked at Kimball and shook his head.

"Besides tearing a bad hole, the bullet has lodged."

"Well, dig it out, Doc," Kimball muttered.

"No, I think I'd better get you home first," Rogan said, and glanced up at Dan Patten who was squatted beside the fire, tamping tobacco into an old corncob pipe. "Does someone around here have a wagon we can take him home in?"

Patten nodded. "Ed Norris has one. I'll fetch it."

Kimball scowled. "Get my horse, Doc. I can make it."

"Lie still if you don't want to bleed to death," Rogan said, and looked over at Norma, smiling wryly. "He thinks he's tough."

Norma said, "Will you need help, Doctor?"

"I could use some all right," Rogan answered.

"Then I'll go along," Norma told him, and turned toward the wagon without look-

ing at Kimball. . . .

Kimball woke up in his own bed, blinked his eyes, and saw that sunlight, streaming in through the window, made a bright pattern across the floor. His hand went down and touched the bandage on his side, and he remembered the rough ride home in the wagon. But it had been worth it because Norma had been along. She had stayed close while Doc Rogan probed for the bullet, and the last thing Kimball remembered, just before he passed out, was looking into her eyes. His side was sore now, but the pain was gone.

"How do you feel?" Norma asked.

He turned his head and saw her sitting beside the bed in a rocking chair, a shawl about her shoulders. "I'm better," he said, and then frowned, asking, "You've been here all night?"

"The doctor said you needed someone to stay with you."

"Why didn't you get Noland, my foreman?"

Norma stood up, suppressing a yawn. "Most men don't make good nurses. Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes, but you go on home and get some sleep."

"I can sleep later," she said, and left the room.

He heard her moving about in the kitchen, rattling the lid on the stove, and presently the smell of coffee drifted in to him. There was a knock on the front door, an impatient rapping that brought Norma hurrying through the room.

With only a glance at Kimball, she said, "Somebody wants to see you. I made him wait outside."

The girl went on into the living room and Kimball heard the front door open, heard Norma say, "He's awake, so you can come in now."

There was a swift pound of boots and Rusty Noland said peevishly, "Well, it's about time."

The ramrod entered the room, a worried expression on his face as he came over to the bed and looked down at Kimball.

"What the Sam Hill happened, Boss? Looks like you'd let a man know something. I come up here this morning early, not knowing a thing is wrong, and that gal meets me at the door and won't let me in."

Kimball smiled at him. "Don't get yourself worked up into such a lather, Rusty."

NORMA had returned to the kitchen and Noland glanced in that direction, scowling.

"Who does she think she is, anyway?"

"The best nurse I ever had," Kimball told him. "And the prettiest, too."

Noland snorted. "Never mind that hogwash. What happened?"

Kimball's face sobered. "I took a little ride last night, Rusty, and Rod Horn followed me, tried to ambush me, but I nailed him. While that was going on, somebody pulled a raid on the nesters."

"The hell you say! Now who could have done that?"

"Reckon it's not too hard to guess, Rusty. Those farmers are squatting on Kicking K range and they're not hurting anybody else. I figure Lake Stafford saw a good chance to stir up some trouble."

Noland nodded slowly. "He's been wanting to get at you for a long time."

"Maybe I made a mistake in not forcing a showdown with him right at first." Kimball's eyes were narrowed thoughtfully.

Norma came in carrying a thick cup of steaming black coffee. Kimball studied her as she moved around the bed. When he tried to sit up, she shook her head and said with mild reproof:

"The doctor left word that you were to stay in bed and take it easy for a few days."

Noland's face turned sour. "I never heard of such a to-do made over anything. He's been shot up before, but he never got treatment like this."

Kimball stared at Norma, saying, "You've done enough for me. I'll be all right now. You run along home and get some sleep . . . Rusty, drive her over in the buckboard."

Norma set the coffee down on the table beside the bed. She said, "I'll come back later and see how you're making out."

Kimball's eyes moved over her face, a reluctance in him to see her go. "Thanks a lot," he murmured.

"I would have done as much for anyone,"

Norma replied, and there was no warmth in her eyes.

"Shucks, and I thought you were beginning to like me a little."

"You shot my brother," she said bitterly, and Kimball had the feeling that she was reminding herself as well as him.

Rusty Noland stood there twisting the brim of his hat and looking uncomfortable. Kimball glanced at him, then back to the girl.

"You're not going to hold that against me forever, are you?" he asked.

"Maybe not. But it will take awhile to forget." Norma put her eyes briefly on him and then, turning, went swiftly from the room. Noland followed her, shaking his head sadly.

IX

SHANE KIMBALL propped himself up and sipped the coffee. It was good and strong, just the way he liked it. The cup was empty and Kimball was shaping a cigarette when a horse came toward the house, hooves making a rhythmical *plopping* sound. The horse came to a stop and Kimball heard the thud of boots across the porch. A moment later, Sheriff Lance Durfee entered the room, his face gloomy, as usual.

"How you doing, Shane?"

"I'm all right, Lance."

The lawman straddled a chair and folded his arms across the back. Looking steadily at Kimball, he said, "Doc fetched Horn's body into town and told me what happened. I don't like the way things are shaping up, Shane."

"I don't either, Lance."

"I'd be willing to bet that Stafford is trying to turn those nesters against you, Shane." Worry shadowed Durfee's eyes. "That's the only way to figure it. He hit 'em last night, but they didn't come gunning for you, so he'll try again, unless I miss my guess. But I'm going to be waiting for him. I'll stake some deputies out along the creek, and we'll be ready for them night-riding sons."

Kimball frowned, a sense of uneasiness working on him. "It's Dennie Mercer I'm thinking of, Lance."

"The kid shouldn't have signed on with Stafford, Shane."

"I know, Lance, but he was sore at me. The kid's not really bad."

Durfee got to his feet and glanced at his watch. "I've got to get back to town, Shane. You better hope the kid won't be riding with 'em tonight, because I'm going to put a stop to that stuff in a hurry."

The sheriff left and Kimball lay there staring into space, his eyes troubled as he thought of Dennie Mercer, the kid who had come all the way from Texas to meet the great Shane Kimball. Kimball had taught him how to use a gun and now it looked as if that shooting iron was going to get the kid into some bad trouble. He might even be killed.

Swearing softly, Kimball swung his legs over the side of the bed. He figured he had to do something about Dennie, and there was no time to lose. Kimball was weak, his legs a little wobbly, but he got his clothes on, strapped his gun about his waist, and went out. The few hands he had left were evidently out riding the range and there was no one around to saddle his horse for him. When he finally got the job done, he was wet with sweat and had to lean against the corral fence and rest a few minutes before climbing aboard the gelding.

On his way toward Squaw Creek and Lake Stafford's Diamond S beyond in the foothills, Kimball came upon Rusty Noland, returning from taking Norma home. The ramrod stopped the team and stared at Kimball, eyes filled with concern.

"You're supposed to be home in bed, Boss."

"I've got a little chore to take care of," Kimball said grimly.

"Well, wait till I get a horse and I'll go along. You're in no shape to—"

Kimball shook his head. "This is something I've got to do alone, Rusty. See you later."

"You damned fool!" Noland called after him, but Kimball didn't stop and he didn't look back.

When he reached the creek, he rode along

the bank, not wanting to cross near the Patten wagon. Norma would be sleeping and he didn't want to disturb her, and then the unpleasant thought came to his mind, You might not see her again.

Kimball stared wistfully at the old rattletrap wagon and made out the figure of Dan Patten, sawing a log in front of a half-finished cabin. In another year there would likely be crops here, green fields where once his cattle had roamed.

Kimball remembered Lance Durfee telling him something like that, and he also remembered the other folks who had tried to settle here and the way he had treated them. But that was the old Shane Kimball. That was before he had looked into the eyes of a girl.

Down the creek a ways, he crossed to the other side, and came presently to a log cabin, finished except for the roof. He would have ridden on by, but Stella Patten came around the side of the house and spoke to him.

"What's your hurry, mister?"

KIMBALL reined in and looked down at her, smiling faintly as he saw the hammer in her hand.

"Don't tell me you've gone to work?"

Stella nodded toward the cabin. "My future home. Not much to brag about, but I guess it will have to do. Ed Norris and I were married last night."

"You don't say?"

"Oh, I knew that's what I'd wind up doing, sooner or later, but I wanted to have a little more fun first."

"What changed your mind?" Kimball asked curiously.

"Ed changed it for me." Stella's voice was faintly bitter. "He raked me over the coals after we left your place yesterday. Said he had let me lead him around by the nose long enough."

"So it was marry him then or never?"

"That's about the size of it."

"Well, congratulations," Kimball said, and picked up the reins.

Stella's eyes moved over his face. "I wish I could have got to know you better, Mr. Kimball. We would have had a lot of fun together."

"It's too late now," Kimball said, and felt an urge to be on his way.

Stella sighed regretfully, then shook the dark mood from her. "I thought you got shot last night?"

"I did, but that sister of yours knows how to take care of a feller."

Stella put the hammer in her other hand, smiling. "That Norma has always been the lucky one in the family."

"So long," Kimball said, and rode on, wondering if he would ever pass this way again.

An hour later he came in sight of the Diamond S, Stafford's ranch at the upper end of Squaw Creek. It was not an impressive spread, for there were weeds growing in the yard and the porch of the tar-paper house needed repairing. But Kimball wasn't interested in those things as he rode up, his eyes roving warily over the yard and coming to rest on the corral.

Lake Stafford was just coming out of the enclosure, followed by three of his men. He was telling them something, words that Kimball couldn't catch. And then Stafford looked up and saw Kimball and the man stopped as suddenly as if he had run into a wall.

Slowly Kimball rode toward them, realizing he was a damned fool for coming here alone, but he had to play it as he saw it. The three men behind Stafford stared at Kimball stonily. They wore guns and looked to be the kind who knew how to use them.

But Kimball's eyes went past them and settled on Dennie Mercer, leaning against the corral fence a few feet away. Dennie looked at him and Kimball failed to find the warmth in the kid's eyes that he had hoped would be there. All Kimball saw was something that told him Dennie would be a long time forgetting that slap in the face.

Lake Stafford's hot eyes were pinned on Kimball. "What the hell do you want here, Kimball?"

"Just rode over to see how the kid's making out," Kimball said steadily. "Wanted to find out how he likes riding with a real tough outfit for a change, a bunch that's not afraid of anything. Why, they're so bad they wouldn't think anything of shooting a farmer, burning his wagon and running off his stock."

Stafford glanced at his men, saw that they were ready, and put his eyes back on Kimball.

"You've got a lot of nerve riding in here alone and talking like that."

"I haven't got nerve," Kimball said. "I've gone soft. I'm afraid of a fight. I'm scared to death that you're not going to let me ride away from here."

"Are you crazy?" Stafford growled.

Kimball shook his head, a cold smile on his lips. "You hate me, Lake. It's been almost more than you could stand since I killed Ernie. Why don't you do something about it? You could gun me down right here and haul my body over and dump it in a canyon somewheres. Nobody would ever now what happened."

THERE was hate in Stafford's eyes and it was growing brighter. "You're asking for it, Kimball, putting ideas into my head. I thought maybe I could stir them nesters up to do it, but that might take too much time. This will be quicker, and surer . . . Take him boys!"

Kimball leaped back, his eyes darting to the kid to see if this had hit Dennie the way he had hoped. Dennie was still there by the fence, a dazed, unbelieving look on his young face.

Whipping out his gun, Kimball fired at a lanky man on Stafford's right. That one had been the first to get his iron up, but before he could squeeze off a shot, Kimball's lead tore into him and the man went down as if he had been hit with a club.

But there were three more of them and their guns were out and talking. Kimball knew he didn't stand a chance against so many, but he'd go down trying.

Then he heard Dennie Mercer yelling with all his might, "This way, some of you skunks!"

A thrill whipped through Kimball and he had a fleeting glimpse of the kid going into action.

For a minute the guns talked loud. Harsh sound beat against Kimball's ears and bullets searched for him, tugging at his shirt and grazing his temple.

He stayed on his feet, though, and kept firing, kept triggering that hot gun in his hand.

Stafford and his men began a slow retreat. They backed up until the corral fence stopped them and most of their lead was going wild now.

Kimball moved toward them. A bullet caught him in the left leg and he staggered, went to his knees, but he kept shooting. Dennie dropped the man on Stafford's left and Kimball accounted for the other one. There was only Stafford then, and he was a hard one to stop. Coming away from the fence, he moved implacably toward Kimball.

The gun in Kimball's hand felt as if it weighed a ton. He brought it up slowly and Stafford was almost on top of him when he pulled the trigger. Stafford stopped, trying hard to get in one last shot, but the strength wasn't in him. He half opened his mouth as though he wanted to tell Shane Kimball something.

The words never came out.

Stafford's legs went from under him and he hit the ground hard.

Dennie Mercer had a scratch on his arm, but that was all.

He came over to Kimball, the old admiration back in his eyes.

"You faced the four of 'em alone! And I thought you'd gone soft!"

Kimball looked up at him.

"I had to play it like that, Dennie. I figured it was the only way to straighten you out."

Bitterness touched Dennie's lips. "I've been a damned fool, Shane, a cocky loudmouthed kid. But I had a chance to do some thinking last night and a lot more awhile ago. I reckon a gun don't prove how big you really are. It's what you've got inside."

"There's some things worth fighting for and some that are not," Kimball said. "It took me a long time to learn that." Then he smiled. "Everything's going to be all right, Dennie."

"Sure," Dennie said. "But right now we better get you to the doc."

Kimball shook his head. "Don't need the doc, Dennie. I know a little gal who can work miracles, and she's a heap prettier than that sawbones, too."

a story by
RICK SARGENT

Danger Carries A Saddle

Married though she was, Sally smiled when the stranger eyed her

MERCILESSLY the sun's warm hand pressed the lone figure down as if it would grind him into the dusty road before he reached the Randall farm.

Sally had watched him eagerly since he had been only a spot on the horizon knowing that he would stop at their place. Now she was almost walking the torturing last quarter-mile with him.

The farm was a lonely place, with only

her husband for company, and in recent weeks it had been worse than usual. Brad spent all his time in the fields trying desperately to harvest alone the corn crop before blazing heat seared it dry.

The stranger came on steadily, doggedly, even though the saddle he carried over his shoulder seemed as if it would be his undoing.

He was still yards away, but she couldn't wait any longer. Opening the door, she waved to him.

"Hello, there!" she called.

As he looked up, she saw that he was young, perhaps nineteen. He lifted his hand in salute.

He dropped the saddle near the door and wiped his dusty, sweat-stained face with his sleeve. "I'd be pleased if I could have a little water, ma'am," he murmured.

It flustered her to have his pale blue eyes caress her as he spoke. "You look tired," she said. "Come in and rest a spell. I'll get you some water, and maybe you'll stay for dinner. We don't have folks drop in out here often."

"Red hair and freckles always did have a way with me," he answered, grinning. "I reckon I'd be proud to."

"What happened to your horse?"

"Got bit by a rattler a ways back. I tried to save him, but there wasn't much I could do."

"Where you headed for?" she asked, dipping water from the pail on the sideboard as he followed her into the house.

He drained the dipper she handed him, before answering, "Next town, or wherever I can get me a job riding trail herd."

She smiled. "You look a little young to—"

"You're not much older than me," he said, shoving his battered brown hat back and nodding at the empty dipper as he added softly, "and you look too downright pretty to be a sodbuster, so we're even."

ADMIRING his tall lean frame and handsome, lightly tanned face, she refilled the dipper. "Where you from?"

"Nowhere—I've got no home," he told her running a hand through his blond hair. "Been on my own since I was twelve."

She felt his eyes roaming over her trim figure and looked away, blushing, as she realized he might have guessed her interest in him had been carried by something more than the loneliness that hovered over the remote farm.

As her husband came in the back door and halted a step inside, she glanced at him.

Her eyes flickered fearfully across his broad, tan face as she said, "Company, Brad. This boy's horse was killed and he stopped in for water."

Brad's lined face seemed to darken, and he looked older than his forty-five years. He looked the tall, young stranger over. His eyes stayed on the polished handle of the visitor's sixgun for a moment, then moved up to his face. He extended a large calloused hand slowly, almost hesitantly.

"Saw you coming up the road. Always glad to help out. What's your name, son?"

"Tommy Clark," the young man answered shaking hands with Brad. "Nice place you got here. First time I ever saw so much corn in Texas."

Brad dropped heavily into one of the hard-backed chairs he had made. "You a farmer?"

"No. Cattle's my trade."

Brad snorted. "Might have known I couldn't be that lucky." Leaning back wearily he went on, "Seems like everybody in Collin County's planted heavy this year. No help to be had for love nor money. Neighbor's boy usually helps me, but this year I got to bring in the whole harvest alone."

He began to roll a cigarette and casually slid the makings across the table to the young rider. "Make yourself at home," he said, pushing a chair away from the table with his foot. "Cattle's all right for some. Me, I like the feel of the soil."

Sally began to bring food out of the pantry. "Wherever Brad goes," she put in, "he brings a little of Iowa with him. Nobody else could pull corn out of black clay that's fit only for rattlers and longhorns."

Brad sat with his hands behind his head, studying Tommy Clark. "Stay and eat with us, if you like."

Sally held her breath waiting for Tom-

my's answer, and hoping he had not caught the inflection in Brad's voice that meant the invitation had not been extended wholeheartedly.

"Thanks," Tommy replied. "My supplies ran out day before yesterday. I guess I could do with some victuals."

Occasionally, Sally would look toward them and see Tommy's eyes shift guiltily back toward Brad, and hoped her husband hadn't noticed.

Impulsively she said, "You can't bring the whole harvest in alone, Brad, and you won't let me work in the field."

He glanced at her suspiciously. "Now Sally, don't go getting ideas. Tommy here is a cattleman. He wouldn't feel natural breaking corn."

Tommy's eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he picked up the makings and rolled a smoke. "I don't hold against sodbusting, and I could learn."

She turned and smiled at Brad. "Why not give him a try? You know how hard you and Ben worked last year, and then you lost a good dozen bushels."

Brad shifted uncomfortbaly. "Well, I guess it might work out all right. I sure need help."

Tommy looked into her eyes and half smiled as she turned back to fixing dinner.

A week after his arrival, Tommy came into the house late one afternoon, and sailed his hat across the table.

Sally looked up, surprised. "Oh, it's you. I thought it was Brad."

"He sent me in. Seems I was thinking about a pretty redhead more'n I was about harvesting corn." He laughed. "Sure is hard to aggravate Brad, but he finally said he didn't think I'd ever learn."

With one foot on the floor, bracing himself, he half sat on the table near her and watched her peel potatoes.

STRETCHING his hand out, he picked up a scrap of peeling and toyed with it for a moment. As she dropped a freshly peeled spud into the large bowl at her elbow, his hand flicked up and caught hers playfully.

His touch was pleasant and gentle. It flattered her to know that even after two years of hard work and farm life, a young man still found her attractive.

Squeezing her hand fondly, he whispered, "I sure do go for red hair and freckles."

They stared at each other for a moment. It was hard for her to pull her hand away. She wanted to hold onto this moment of reassurance and savor it.

A slow smile started at the corners of his lips, and he started to rise to come toward her.

She snatched her hand back. "I'm a married woman, Tommy."

"I could forget that easy."

"But I can't," she answered sharply.

He walked around in back of her as she continued peeling potatoes, even though her hands were shaking.

His hands settled lightly on her shoulders, caressing them.

Tilting her head back she looked up at him. "Stop that!"

Bending down, he kissed her forehead.

Twisting away, she stood up, facing him. "Tommy, we can't—"

Stepping toward her, he took her in his arms and kissed her hungrily, holding her tight.

Stark fear slapped her as she heard Brad's heavy tread nearing the house.

She pushed Tommy into a chair, sat down and picked up a potato.

Brad opened the door and glared at them. "Sitting around won't get the corn in."

"But Brad, you told me to go on up to the house."

"Didn't tell you to stay here all afternoon did I?" His anger seemed to soften momentarily. "Damn it, boy, we've got a crop to harvest. I can't help it if I—"

Tommy smiled and picked up his hat. "Sure, Brad, I understand. Come on. We're wasting time."

Sally watched them walking back to the fields. Brad's arm around Tommy's shoulders. She could not help admitting to herself that Tommy's passionate kiss had thrilled her as Brad's awkward, embarrassed kisses never had.

The following morning, Sally was baking bread and singing as she worked when Tommy came into the house holding a

bandanna around his forearm.

"Cut?" she asked.

"Not bad," he answered. "Got a bandage handy?"

She opened a drawer and brought out some clean white cloth and scissors.

He unwrapped the bandanna, exposing a three-inch gash.

"Deep?" she asked.

"Just a scratch," he replied as she wiped the arm with a damp cloth.

"How'd it happen?"

He grinned. "After yesterday, I figured I'd better have a good excuse to get together with a certain red-haired gal—"

Swiftly she wrapped the cloth over the wound and tied it. "If Brad guesses what you're up to, there'll be hell to pay," she said angrily.

He grabbed her. "What we care about him?"

Forcing her voice to drop to an outraged whisper, she said, "Turn loose, *sonny.*"

He only bent forward trying to kiss her.

If only she could stop at a kiss—but she could not trust herself in his arms. Not with his strong, young body this close; not when she could feel the coals of sensual excitement already glowing deep down inside her.

As she struggled to break away, her hand crept along the table top and snatched at the scissors, then darted forward, pressing their sharp steel points against his side.

He swore and stepped back. "You sure are changing your tune, Red."

Tossing the scissors on the table, she leaned back against it and crossed her arms. Looking at him, she wondered if she would be able to resist temptation if he ever tried to make love to her again.

BUT she said firmly, "Look, Tommy, let's get something straight. Brad's treated me right. He picked me up when my dad, the only relative I had, got lynched for a gambling hall shooting. Brad even had to put up a fight to get me out alive. I'd never known anything but gambling, traveling, and dance halls till he married me. Sure, he's old enough to be my father, but he's kind and considerate. Most men would have me out there in the fields helping with the harvest, but not Brad. Maybe I wasn't in love with him when he married me, but I am now, and I don't intend to cheat on him."

"Then why'd you start giving me the eye?"

She turned away. "You're—well, I was lonely I thought—"

His arms came around her again, and she did not want to resist him. "You don't fool me, Red. You're just afraid of him."

Pushing his hands away, she said, "Take it any way you like, but keep your hands off me."

Insolently, his fingers continued their caressing, exploring. She let them stay for a few seconds, wanting him, and at the same time, despising him. She could not betray Brad.

Whirling, she slapped him. "No means no!" she flung at him. "Now get out of here before I call my husband and you're in real trouble.

He grinned mirthlessly. "You're falling for me, Red, and you know it."

"Get out of here!"

He left, slamming the door loudly.

For one terrible moment, she wanted to call him back. She clinched her hands, praying she could resist the damning desire until he was far enough from the house that she couldn't call without Brad hearing.

After a long, pain-racked minute, she slowly let her hands unclench, and looked down at the palms. Her fingernails had dug into the flesh until blood dripped from their curved impressions. . . .

On Sunday morning, Brad sent Tommy to the well and came into the bedroom where Sally was dressing for church.

Slipping his thick arm around her, he asked, "Do you think I ought to tell Tommy to leave?"

She looked at him in the mirror, and as she leaned her head on his shoulder, she knew he was searching for a reason to suspect her. And also, that a word in the wrong place, or even the wrong tone, would bring his temper to a self-righteous boiling point.

"After the harvest is in, there won't be any reason for him to stay," she finally said.

"I mean now. He's not much help to me."

"Brad," she said angrily, "he's never done this kind of work. You're expecting too much of the boy."

He sat down on the bed. His brow wrinkled as he said, "I don't like him." Looking down at his work-battered hands as if he were ashamed he whispered, "And the way he looks at you sometimes—"

"He's just a boy."

"Maybe you're tired of an old gray-haired sodbuster like me?" he suggested.

Resting her hands on his shoulders, she kissed his broad forehead. "There's room in my heart for only one man, and that's my husband, because I happen to love him."

"He's got to leave, Sally, that's all there is to it. I can't trust him around you. If I thought he'd ever laid a hand on you, I'd—" His gaze shifted upward to the rifle that hung over the head of the bed.

"Brad, stop talking like that!"

He looked up at her as if trying to read her thoughts.

Searching for reasons to avoid a return to the feeling of isolation and resentment of drudgery she had felt before Tommy had come, she said falteringly, "He's got himself all tangled up, but being here with us, perhaps getting the feel of the soil as you say—"

Grabbing her arm, he jerked her toward him. "Are you in love with him?"

SHE slapped him. "That was a rotten thing to say," she said petulantly, "and you know its not so."

"Do I?"

"You should," she answered, affetcionately kissing the lined cheek she had just slapped.

As he left the room to look for Tommy, she tried to think of some way to talk him out of sending the handsome young cowboy away.

Tommy was getting his few belongings together when she and Brad started to leave for church.

Brad noticed the whip was not on the wagon and went to the barn for it.

"I'll stay till you get back, then maybe I'll be going," Tommy told her.

"I'm sorry, Tommy. If we'd met sooner, maybe. . . ."

He smiled slightly. "Say your prayers, Red. Might be I got another chip to play."

"What does that mean?"

He nodded toward Brad who was returning with the whip. "Like I said, just say your prayers . . . ."

Many times during the services, and afterwards, as they rode back to the farm, Sally's lips pursed to speak of the impulsive reasons that had come to her about why Tommy should stay on. Reluctantly, she let them die unspoken. Brad would know they were just excuses.

As the wagon topped the hill that overlooked the farm, Brad whipped the horse up as if in a hurry to get back home. And, as the house seemed to grow larger, so did Sally's terror of the dirge of days ahead.

They had just entered the house when Tommy came in behind them.

"Brad, your neighbor, Ben, came by lookin' for you. Wouldn't say what he wanted. Wants you to drive over and see him."

Brad rubbed a hand across his jaw. "Now what in tarnation could he want? Reckon I had better go right now."

He started back to the wagon, then stopped and glanced at Sally. "You better come along, too."

Tommy had just taken his sixgun from the hook above the mantle where it had hung since he'd arrived. As Brad spoke, Sally noticed Tommy almost dropped the weapon.

They had just turned onto the road that led to Ben's farm when the wagon lurched. She screamed at the front axle's tip jabbed into the hard dirt and the wagon tipped over, wrenching itself into the ditch with the sound of shattering wood echoing around them.

For a moment, she lay where she had fallen, afraid to move. Then slowly she untangled herself and stood up, coughing in the whirling dust that poked itself down her throat.

Brad lay on his side, a thin trickle of blood running across his forehead, and one leg twisted under him. Kneeling beside him, she held his head in her hands and felt a little of her horror vanish at the knowledge, although he was unconscious he was alive.

Looking up at the roadway, she saw Tommy standing there.

"You all right, Sally?" he called.

"Don't just stand there, you damn fool! Brad's hurt. Help me get him to the house."

Tommy grinned as he came down the bank. "Well, don't that beat all! Wheel come plumb off the wagon didn't it?"

Suspiciously, she watched him pick Brad up and start toward the house.

Stopping, he looked back at her. "He's not hurt much. Just a sprained ankle. Not even broke, near as I can tell."

"You did this!" she flounced. "You fixed that wheel!"

"Aw, Red, you wouldn't want me to go away, would you? Just when we was getting real friendly? I just can't go now and leave Brad to get the rest of the crop in by his self, him hurt and all."

"You could have killed both of us."

"Didn't figure he'd take you with him," he answered, and went on toward the house.

After they had put Brad in bed, Sally went to the well.

She had no sooner lowered the bucket than Tommy came up behind her.

Gently he kissed the back of her neck.

HER heart picked up speed, as the thrill of his touch tried to steal over her. She straightened slowly, fighting the urge to step into his embrace. She slapped him as hard as she could.

"Don't you ever dare touch me!" she screamed at him.

He rubbed his face, eyeing her with surprise. "For a little filly, you sure pack a wallop. Maybe I did kind of pick the wrong time."

"Get away from me, your rotten, no-good—"

As his footsteps faded away, she leaned against the well, sobbing. The spot where he had kissed her still burned, searing her with the desire to run after him.

Choking back tears, she began to bring the bucket up. She almost let herself wish Brad had been killed so she would be free to accept Tommy's love.

As the harvest neared completion, Tommy often came back to the house before noon. Brad, feverishly breaking corn and watching the sky, apparently did not notice his helper's absence.

Early one afternoon, Tommy came into the house and sat watching Sally mending clothing.

She tried to keep her mind on her work as his blue eyes sought hers.

After a few minutes, he got up and walked around the room restlessly, moving gradually toward where she sat at the table.

He stopped at the mantle. Taking his six-gun out of the holster, he whirled the chamber—swiftly at first, then slowing, until she was waiting for each faint click to increase the tension that had invaded the room.

Slowly he came up behind her, each step echoing as if it were a tree falling. The needle in her fingers froze in mid-stroke as his hand touched her hair.

"Let's play games, Red."

Determinedly she put down the shirt on which she had been stitching and sat very still. Her heart hammered like an enraged beast trying to escape its cage. Her voice was level as she said:

"I don't want to play your kind of *games*, Tommy."

Laying his hand on her forearm possessively, he said, "And I'm tired of playing yours."

He jerked her to her feet and toward him. His lips pressed against hers, stifling protests as she tried to squirm away. Resistance drained from her as he kissed her, open-mouthed.

Insistently he pushed her toward the bedroom.

"No! Please don't, Tommy, please!"

He laughed as she lost her balance and fell backward onto the bed.

Reaching her hand up, she laid it along his cheek, ready to rake her nails down it. Unaccountably, her fingers straightened and caressed the cheek as he kissed her again.

His smooth, warm hand roved over her body, and at that moment, it seemed to her Brad had been right. Perhaps she had intended it to end this way, even from that first moment she'd seen Tommy on the horizon.

"Sally!"

Tommy jumped back at the sound of Brad's voice.

The sodbuster stood in the doorway, his powerful arms bare and swinging wide at his sides. His eyes glowed.

"Brad—" Sally began.

"There's no way you can explain," he said. "I've watched you two all along. I just wanted to be sure, dead sure, before I—"

Tommy's face paled. "Now look, she's in love with me. We'll just pack up and leave."

Brad's large fist caught him on the jaw and sent him backward with blood streaming from his mouth as he fell.

To Sally, it was as if the hard knuckles had struck her as well. She could almost feel the torn lips exuding a salty stream of blood inside her mouth as it was in Tommy's.

"No young sidewinder is going to come into my home and steal my wife and get away with it!"

"Don't be a fool, Brad," Sally screamed. "Let him go!" But even then, she knew it was useless.

Brad glanced at her. "The way he was going after you, sure didn't look like you was objecting none. And you kept wanting him to stay. You think I don't know why?"

Her face turned a bright red. "That's a lie!"

BRAD reached down, yanked Tommy to his feet, and threw him into the living room. "I'm going to kill you."

He moved in on the cowboy who groped to stay on his feet.

Vainly Tommy jabbed a right to the ribs. Brad showed no sign of feeling it as he sent another roundhouse blow to the jaw, snapping Tommy's head back.

Tommy staggered against the mantle, and his hand found the holstered sixgun hanging there.

Sally stood in the doorway watching them.

Brad, ignoring the gun, moved forward like a huge, clumsy, enraged bear. His right fist lashed out with surprising speed, and Tommy went down as if clubbed.

Brad aimed a kick at the sixgun as Tommy hit the floor. But instead of hitting the pistol, his heavy, mud-crusted boot slammed into the young fellow's side. Sally screamed as she heard his ribs crack.

Inching back along the floor, Tommy jerked up the gun. "Don't make me use this on you, Brad."

"I don't need a gun to take care of you!" Brad yelled, and again his foot whipped out at the gun.

Tommy tried to roll away. The kick grazed his upturned chest, ripping through his shirt and tearing into the flesh beneath.

He fired. The bullet grazed Brad's shoulder and smashed a window near Sally.

She felt sick. How much more could Tommy take before he'd shoot to kill and end it? Somehow, she had to stop them.

Stepping back into the bedroom, she grabbed the rifle from above the headboard. Slamming a cartridge into the chamber, she braced herself in the doorway.

Rolling to his feet, Tommy sidestepped as Brad tried to snatch the sixgun.

He now said to Brad, "You better let us get out of here."

"She is not going with you," Brad snarled and swung at him.

The blow smashed into Tommy's shoulder and spun him around as he yelled, "You're askin' for a bullet!"

Sally brought the rifle up and yelled at them to stop.

They ignored her.

Brad cocked his right hand low at his side for a full swing.

The memory of Tommy's kisses were still on her lips, and she wanted to stop the punch, but her hand quivered when the rifle aimed at Brad, and she could not fire.

Brad moved forward, his weight on his right leg, his arm behind him and almost straight, with his fist looking like the ball of a mace.

Brad's arm started its sweeping forward swing, and the .44 in Tommy's hand bucked again.

Brad staggered, dropped to one knee, and as Sally stared at the blood soaking his trousers, she wanted to run and help him.

"I'll kill you, so help me God!" Brad bellowed and came to his feet, lunging with his

hands spread wide and aimed at Tommy's throat.

Tommy backed away. His eyes narrowed coldly, the muzzle of the sixgun was aimed at Brad's heart, and Sally knew he would be dead in another instant.

Her decision made, her hands felt chilled and steady. Her lips pressed into a firm hard line as the rifle swung imperceptibly to the left and spoke loud in the room.

Tommy lurched, stiffened, and fell forward as his shot splintered the floor boards at his feet.

Brad looked around unbelievingly, to see Sally standing in the doorway with smoke curling from the rifle in her hands.

She threw the rifle aside and ran to him.

They stood in each other's arms looking down at Tommy, who lay moaning and clutching his side as blood trickled through his fingers and stained the rough floor.

Her voice was dry, and tears were hard to fight back as she said, "I told you once, there was room for you only in my heart, but I didn't know how true it was until that awful moment when I saw he was going to kill you. I love you, Brad."

His thick arms no longer seemed awkward as he held her. "It's all right, darling," he whispered hoarsely. "Everything is all right now. Don't cry."

He nodded toward the whimpering cowboy on the floor. "We'd better get him to town and a doctor."

SANTA ANNA, THE CHEWING GENERAL

DURING the Mexican War the Fourth Illinois Infantry didn't capture General Santa Anna at the battle of Cerro Gordo in 1847, but they did find his wooden leg. The General's leg, it is said, served as a fairly effective baseball bat during games played at Jalapa.

Perhaps that was the only tribute those men thought the General deserved back in 1847, but we in the 1950's pay the General a lasting memorial many of us don't realize we are paying. Folks remember Santa Anna as the butcher of the Alamo and the loser at San Jacinto, but probably very few remember him as the man being responsible for our habit of gum chewing.

During Santa Anna's fitful career he was in and out of power and was exiled many times. During one of his many exiles the Mexican General lived on Staten Island in New York. Here he paced his garden nervously chewing a mysterious substance.

Santa Anna's neighbor, James Adams, often talked with the man once titled as "The Most Serene Highness of The Supreme Powers of The Universe" and discovered the rubbery wad Santa Anna always chewed was known as chicle. The General generously gave Mr. Adams a hunk of chicle and soon after decided to thrust himself back into the public eye once again.

The Mexican General went on to many exciting escapades while James Adams stayed home and experimented with the chicle, adding sweetening and flavoring to improve its taste. The giant chewing gum industry eventually sprang from this strange beginning and pompous Santa Anna inadvertently left a memorial to himself, one he would figure justly suitable for "The Most Serene Highness of The Supreme Powers of The Universe."

—D. Hatfield

When the brother of a bad man proves just as bad, he should be greeted with the same kind of lead

The Colt swung towards me, and the room was filled with one hell of a roar

Sam Cherrill Says Hello

By JOHN EDWARD BURNS

INDIAN summer had come to Riverbend, and the rays of the morning sun were streaming through my window. A good day to investigate the creek behind the Wilson ranch, I figured. Just the other day old Ben Wilson had been telling me and Russ Andrews how big the trout were getting to be. Now I reckon most folks round about could tell you how Russ and I were always trying to outdo one another, specially when it came to fishing. We'd been friendly feuding since we'd been kids, and most every year he seemed to get the best of me. But this time I was planning an all-out campaign. I was going to stay by that creek until I got one trout so big it'd make Russ break his fish pole. And by taking a day off to look things over, I figured to get the jump on him.

The mess I made of the eggs I was

cooking for my breakfast brought me back from the trout and Wilson's creek, and back to Russ. Just yesterday Russ—he's deputy marshal in town now—was carrying on about how good married life was, and didn't I allow I was getting on, if I ever planned to get hitched, and that it was my turn anyway.

He had some kind of a point there, me being the only single fellow left in our crowd, and though I wouldn't admit it at gun point, sometimes after a long ride I'd be sore as hell when I'd reason maybe I was getting out of the yearling class. Well, I let that thought go and said what I always did—something about maybe next year. Thirty-five would be a nice time to settle down.

I pulled out an old pair of patched britches, a denim jacket, and an old felt hat from the beat-up trunk I keep under my bed. The fellows all laugh and carry on about me keeping a hope chest, but I always tell them it's just jealousy. Me being free to fish and carry on as I please, while they got to report to the little woman. That usually shuts 'em up.

The clothes was kind of seedy-looking, but they were fine for busting through the brush alongside the creek. I got to pondering about company, and figured I'd go over and try to talk Al Stern into knocking off for the day to come along with me. Al's a pretty big man in Riverbend now, one of the leading citizens, and likewise president of the one bank in town. Me and him and Russ were what you'd call boyhood friends, and never grew out of it.

Coming out of my shack the sun blasted right into my eyes and I pulled the old felt lower for shade. I passed onto Main Street and walked down toward the most impressive spot in town—the bank.

Riverbend was just like any other mining town to be found in Colorado. Everything had come in one great big rush following Jess Riley's discovery of silver some twenty years back. All the stores on the one road leading up to the mine were wooden shacks with big, important-look-

[*Turn page*]

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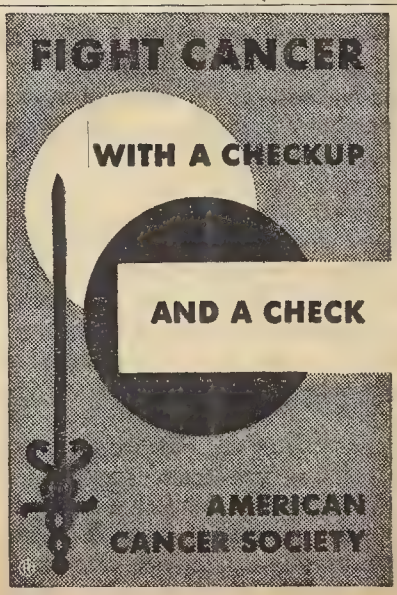

ing false fronts. The bank was the only brick building for thirty miles around. We were all kind of proud of it, and everybody had gathered around when the company from Denver set it up.

I guess all the boys from Jack's Saloon felt they had a sort of proprietary interest in that bank. They were always standing around, giving little helpful bits of advice to the builders. I figure I bothered them city fellers a little myself, but it sure was interesting, just watching it take on shape.

I went through the big barred glass door in front and said "Morning" to Miss Drew and young Joe Phillips, Al's tellers. Sally Drew always gave me a big smile and the sort of hello that made me kind of nervous. She sure was a looker though. There was no customers yet so I went over to Al's big desk and eased myself into one of his leather chairs. He was making out he was busy leafing through some important-looking papers. This was an old game, me trying to talk him into taking the day off. I knew that as soon as he spotted my outfit he would be figuring up some fancy arguments for me. He'd carry on for about twenty minutes about what an important man he was, and how busy. Then he'd make out like because he knew I'd get lonely out there and start talking to myself, he'd better come to watch out for me. This game had been going on for the last five years and we both played it out like it was the first time. Al was a real hound on trout fishing. I leaned back and relaxed in the padded chair and started to build a smoke.

The talk had been going on for about ten minutes, me doing most of it, and I was just about to pull the clincher about old Ben Wilson's creek when I saw Al look past me toward the front door. A serious look came over his face and I knew he wasn't fooling any more. I swiveled the big chair around to get a look at what had busted up my fine oration on the joys of outdoor life and fishing in general. A young feller was coming through the front door. Nice-looking kid, maybe nineteen or twenty, only the big Navy Colt in his hand didn't look so nice. He was kind of waving it around, covering all four of us in the bank at once. It was waving, but it looked damned business-like. And the boy who carried it looked twice that. Looking like he did this kind of thing maybe every day of the week, and it wasn't nothing new to him. He stopped in the middle of the room, reached under his shirt and pulled out a canvas sack. Then he looked over at us and spoke to Al.

"Banker, this gun's looking right down your throat. Get a move on and put the cash in this bag."

HE TOSSED the sack toward us and Al caught it. Next the boy looked at me.

"Farmer, put your hands up and keep your mouth shut. Anybody wants to try anything, the lady here gets it fast."

Miss Drew looked scared but she sure did look mighty pretty, too. Al went over

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•

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back of the counter and started stuffing that sack full of greenbacks. He didn't seem at all put out about the whole thing. But it's generally opined around town that Al Stern is just about the best poker player in the whole country. He could keep the straightest face of anybody I ever did see. When he had the sack full to the brim he handed it back to the kid. The boy backed slowly towards the door, kind of a crooked grin on his face. Real clean-cut-looking young feller. I guess he figured it had been too easy and maybe he allowed he'd like to brag a little in front of such a nice-looking girl like Sally Drew. Anyway when he got his back to the glass door, he started a right long conversation, getting real serious, too. I had him pegged for just a wild kid somebody had given wrong ideas to, but as soon as I heard his little speech I knew I'd been a hundred per cent wrong.

"That marshal you got here," was what he said, "the one's been getting himself a reputation, you tell this Sam Cherrill he'll find his deputy behind the jailhouse. Tell him Jake Carson's brother shot him. Yeah, that's right, the brother of the feller Cherrill killed in this bank last month. I'm coming back to get the marshal too. You tell him that." The boy started backing slow out the door.

He was halfway through when I shouted at him.

The Navy Colt swung towards me and the room was filled with one hell of a roar. Young Carson was thrown backwards out into the street just as if he'd been kicked in the chest by a mule. I followed him through the door, still holding the smoking .44. The kid was lying on the wooden sidewalk by the bank hitching post.

His eyes were starting to glass over and I could tell there was no sense sending for Doc Walker. Bending low over him, I asked if he could hear me. He managed a low grunt and I knew he'd be all washed up in a few seconds. I figured he had a right to know, dying like he was, so I told him.

"Son, you see your brother Jake, tell him Sam Cherrill says hello."

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A Cargo of Range Facts and Oddities

AT HUTCHINS, Kansas, President Rutherford B. Hayes, on a jaunt around the country, put out his hand to shake with a local cowboy. After looking the President over, the cowboy said, "Seems kind of like I seen your face somewheres before, stranger, but dag-gone if I can recollect your name."

* * * * *

Overland trails of the Indians, some of them worn deep long before white men came to America, were remarkable for following the shortest and easiest routes possible between two points. Just to prove this is no pointless item, read it again. There are two.

* * * * *

In Denver, Mrs. Robert Fitzgerald complained that while she was cooking dinner a nude man ran in, kissed her and ran out. Didn't even pause to sample the soup, we are told.

* * * * *

An aquatic ranch near Chandler, (doesn't say whether it's the one in Texas, Arizona or Oklahoma) awhile back imported 34 sea rodents called copyus from Argentina. They produce pelts similar to beaver, need special watery pens to live in and cost $800 a pair. Any of you copyus cats interested?

* * * * *

Lawbreakers got the boom lowered on them in Frisco back in the gold rush period, on account of the jail there for many years was the old brig Euphemia.

* * * * *

The entire area of six European countries —Luxembourg, Andorra, Liechenstein, San Marino, Monaco and the Vatican State—is less than the size of the King Ranch in Texas. Texas itself is larger than 58 of the 65 nations of the world. 'Twarn't a Texan who told us so, neither.

* * * * *

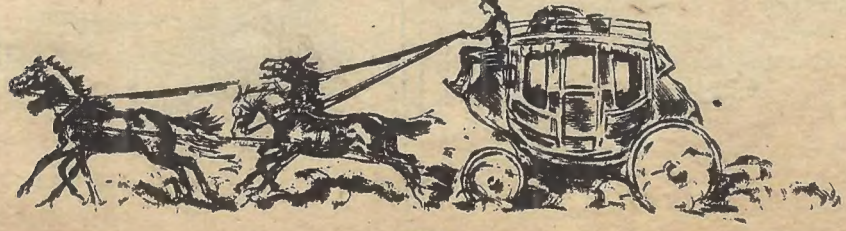
Soup made from boiled boots has saved the life of many a man lost in the West. Mark Twain, the famous writer, was one who once resorted to it. Give us an old T-bone, rare, any time.

* * * * *

Some time ago Mrs. Jack Hislop, wife of a sheep rancher near Huntsville, Utah, fired a single pistol shot through her window one night, intending to scare away a "large dog" that had been molesting some of the sheep. Next morning she almost fainted to discover she'd killed a nine-foot mountain lion. Tsk, tsk. Hardly more'n a cub.

* * * * *

Custer's famed last stand lasted for less than an hour. That's about the size of it.



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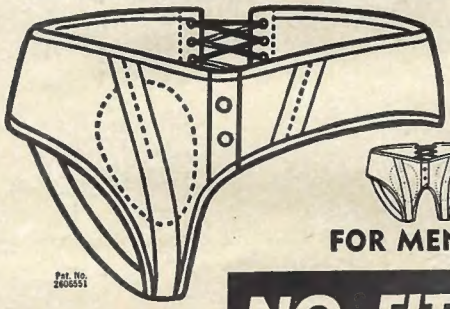

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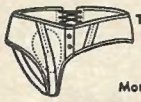

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